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# ROBERT ORD'S ATONEMENT.



# ROBERT ORD'S ATONEMENT.

A Novel.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"NELLIE'S MEMORIES," "BARBARA HEATHCOTE'S TRIAL,"  
"WEE WIFIE," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



LONDON:

TINSLEY BROTHERS, 8, CATHERINE STREET, STRAND.

1873.

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COVENT GARDEN.

To my Brothers.



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OF

THE FIRST VOLUME.

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# ROBERT ORD'S ATONEMENT.

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## CHAPTER I.

### THE KING'S HEAD.

"The sultry summer day is done,  
The western hills have hid the sun,  
But mountain peak and village spire  
Retain reflection of his fire.  
Old Barnard's towers are purple still,  
To those that gaze from Toller's hill;  
Distant and high, the tower of Bowes  
Like steel upon the anvil glows,  
And Stainemore's ridge, behind that lay  
Rich with the spoils of parting day,  
In crimson and in gold array'd."

SCOTT'S *Rokeby*.

"I used him for a friend,  
Before I ever knew him for a friend.  
'Twas better, 'twas worse also, afterwards  
We came so close, we saw our differences  
Too intimately."

AURORA LEIGH.

### "BARNARD CASTLE."

"All right for Barnard Castle. Any luggage, sir?" was the civil inquiry addressed to the solitary occupant of a second-class compartment who was leisurely folding his paper and shaking off a rather liberal allowance of dust as he did so. "Any luggage in the van, sir?"

A negative shake of the head was the some-

what curt rejoinder as he gave *The Leeds Mercury* a final fold, and shouldering his shabby black bag stepped on the platform, looking about him with the air of a man who was treading new ground, and who seemed to deduce a certain amount of pleasure from that fact, judging from the curious glances he cast around as he threaded the little knot of passengers and porters that blocked up the narrow doorway.

Out into the broad sunny road beyond, where there was a cloud of grey dust and a cheeping and twittering of brown sparrows, and where one homely country equipage was lumbering up by the side of a farmer's red-wheeled gig and a donkey-cart.

"King's Arms?" persuasively suggested the conductor, a dark saturnine man with a straw in his mouth. "King's Arms—take you up there in three minutes, sir; best beds and best accommodation in the whole of Barnard Castle."

"Which are your other inns, my friend?" asked the stranger, as three unmistakeable commercial gentlemen pushed past him to secure the best places, and two more clambered up to the top to the tune of jingling seals and chains. "This seems to be a quiet place, but I suppose there is competition even at Barnard Castle."

"Law bless you, yes, sir!" replied the man rubbing his head, "especially in the season. Why, let me see, there's the Commercial, the Rose and

Crown, the Hangel, the Turk's Head, and the Bay Horse, but there's nobody but will say the King's Head will beat 'em hollow. Come, we're filling up, jump in, sir," but the offer was declined. An old blind woman with a bundle, a basket of vegetables, and some sunflowers tied up in a blue-spotted handkerchief had followed the commercial gentlemen, and after her came two servant-girls out for a holiday ; the interior looked hot and fusty, and the best outside places were taken.

"I have no fancy for old women and onions," muttered the stranger. Then louder, "Don't wait for me, my man, I shall walk on." And so saying he strode off at a pace which would have suited few men on a hot June day, especially as the sun was almost vertical, and poured down its rays on the long shadowless road with a steady glare that made the heaped-up dust feel like heated blankets to the feet.

He had soon left the road behind him and was halfway up the long straggling street that leads to the market-place, a drowsy grass-grown old place, where the old-fashioned inns blinked sleepily at each other across the wide empty street, where a few antique shops displayed fewer and still more antique wares, where the green weeds grew up between the stones, and the stones were rutty and uneven from age, and not from traffic ; where for six days of the week there



was an almost sabbath-like stillness, and only a semblance of life on market-days; where the grating of wheels was the exception and not the rule; and the children trundled hoops and upset their little go-carts fearless of horses' hoofs; and where a few factory lads and lasses were wont to congregate on a summer's evening; a place which in its sunny drowsiness reminded Robert Ord of some quaint old Continental town he had once seen many years ago.

Mine host of the King's Arms was indulging in a siesta under the shade of his own portico, perhaps seduced thereto by the general sleepiness of things animate and inanimate. Some fantail pigeons were strutting about in the dust almost at his feet. He woke up rather startled at being suddenly addressed, and seemed bent on vindicating himself.

"I beg your pardon, sir; I believe—that is—I think I was asleep."

"A very sensible proceeding on such a hot morning," assented the stranger, politely. "I am sorry to have disturbed you. I only asked if you were the proprietor of the King's Arms?"

"Yes, sir; Samuel Morison, at your service. Here comes our bus with some of our commercial gentlemen; perhaps you will walk in, sir, it is piping hot outside. Do you wish for a private room, sir?"

"I should like a place where I could speak to

you alone for a few minutes," was the somewhat impatient reply. "Look here, Mr. Morison, my name is Robert Ord. Now you know my business with you and the King's Arms, and that I have a question or two to put to you that I shall want answered without delay."

"Mr. Ord ; certainly, sir, a dozen if you wish. I had no idea, none whatever, to whom I had the honour of speaking. Come in pray, sir." And so saying he led the way through a long dark old hall, with a far-off glimpse of a cool stone-yard, where a grey-haired ostler was rubbing down a horse, up a narrow and still darker staircase into a small room looking over the market-place, with a sweet stuffy smell in it—the scent of fresh roses and dried lavender together.

There was some needlework neatly folded on the table, which made Mr. Ord hesitate and look inquiringly at his conductor.

"This room is engaged, is it not?"

"Yes, sir, but Miss Maturin won't mind—and I have no other room unoccupied at present ; she's lying down now with a sick headache, so the chambermaid told us, and so it is quite at your service."

"Who's Miss Maturin?" was on Robert Ord's lips, but he checked himself on remembering that it was no business of his, and declining refreshments somewhat shortly, took possession of the wide old-fashioned window-seat, and throwing

down his black bag, faced round on his host and begged him also to be seated.

"Now, Mr. Morison, I want to know how it came about that my aunt—Mrs. Ord, that is—died at your house?"

"Mrs. Ord, sir?"

"You see I know all about it, bad news travels fast, I was quite aware of what happened before I started. I got Mr. Tracy's two letters together—by-the-bye, I never thought of asking if he be here."

"Yes, sir; leastways he was here this morning, but he's gone on to Deepdale with a party, and we don't expect them back till latish; but perhaps you will prefer to speak to Miss Maturin."

"Who in the world is this Miss Maturin?" broke out from Robert Ord, this time impatiently enough. "I can't understand what Miss Maturin has to do with my business."

The landlord coughed.

"Why, Miss Maturin is the young woman—the young lady I should say—who served as companion to the diseased lady." He called it diseased lady, which provoked Robert Ord to a half smile. "She's lived with her nigh upon four years I've heard tell, and some of us do say that hers has not been a bed of roses, leastways there must have been a power of thorns in it too, judging from the poor lady's ways and words with her. But still for all that she's taking on

and pining that way after her that it makes one quite sorry to see her, poor young creature." And the compassionate landlord wiped his eyes with the feeling of a man who had daughters of his own.

"I suppose she is friendless and has lost a comfortable home; but I think we are wandering a little from the subject, Mr. Morison. I am rather anxious to know what brought my aunt to the King's Arms, Barnard Castle, of all places."


"Yes, sir; and I brought in Miss Maturin's name because I thought she might give you more information than I could; not but what I will willingly tell you all I know about the poor lady."

"Well, sir, the first time I ever set eyes on her was last July, when she and Miss Maturin arrived late one evening. They were on their way from the Cumberland Lakes, and there was some break-down or stoppage on the line. It is not the first time, sir, by a great many that folk come for one night and end by staying some days; and to make a long story short, your aunt, Mrs. Ord, sir, took a fancy to the place, as she told me in that free pleasant way of hers that she had sometimes, and she and Miss Maturin and her maid and their bag and baggage were with us I should say nigh upon two months."

"Hum, capricious as usual," muttered Robert Ord, under his breath. "Well, Mr. Morison, I don't suppose you often have such a good customer as my aunt?"

"Well, sir, the King's Arms has had better and it has had worse in its days, though I say it that shouldn't, not but what the poor lady dealt fairly enough with us, and it is not for the likes of us to judge them that have gone before. But not to detain you, sir, about three weeks ago comes a letter from Miss Maturin, post mark Clifton, engaging rooms for Mrs. Ord and herself, with just a word at the end saying that she hoped the house was quiet, for her lady was a sad invalid. It seems that she had been off and on ailing all the winter, and when the fine weather came she was sort of restless and kept moving from place to place, which the doctors told Miss Maturin was a symptom of the disease. Nothing would do but she must have her old rooms at the King's Arms, and see a little more of her favourite place, and not all they could say or do to dissuade her had the least effect. And as I said before, to make a long story short, she just came on one fine summer's evening as I was sitting behind the bar with a commercial gentleman of my acquaintance."

"Did she look very ill?" asked his listener, with the first sign of interest he had shown yet.



"Mr. Ord, sir, there was death in her face," said the landlord, solemnly. "She had that look of breaking up that isn't to be misunderstood in any case, least of all in a lady of her age. Some of us who were following her minded how she clutched at Miss Maturin's arm to steady herself from falling; but all the same, she said in a cheery sort of voice— 'Mr. Morison,' she said, 'I hope you have given me my old room, for I am going to disappoint my doctors, and get well here as fast as I can,' and those were the last words I ever heard her say."


A brief sigh from Robert Ord was his sole comment. He had put his elbow on the window-sill now, and was looking down into the market-place. Perhaps the landlord's discourse wearied him, but he offered no interruption. Mr. Morison cleared his throat, for he was getting a little husky, and proceeded— evidently his story was after his own heart, and he thought he was telling it well—

"Man disposes, sir, but the Almighty has the making up of it all in the end. And the best of us makes a sad mess of the little we do. Well, when we had got the poor lady upstairs, Miss Maturin and the maid helped her to bed, which some of us knew she would never leave again; not Miss Maturin though, for she told our chambermaid that she really thought Mrs. Ord

had taken a turn for the better, she was so sprightly like; but when the morning came she was too weak to rise, and the next day and the next, and so it went on.

"Well, it might have been a week or it might be more, I was down in the Castle garden which belongs to the King's Arms, and is so called because it is laid out partly in the ruins, which is one of the sights of Barnard Castle that strangers come to see—I was down in the Castle garden I say, getting in our peas, when who should I see but Miss Maturin coming down the centre walk, and looking as white as her gown. And when she gets up to me she says—

" 'Mr. Morison, will you send some of your people with this to the station immediately? Mrs. Ord is much worse, and I am afraid she is dying. You must not lose a minute—not one minute, please, for,' says she, clasping her hands, 'there's wrong may be done that will be past undoing.' You may not believe me, sir, but what with the sunshine, her white dress, and the scared look on her face, I was sort of dazed; you might have knocked me over with a feather. For the life of me I could not think what man I had to send, through it not being the full season, and our single-handed waiter being laid up with lumbago, and the Boots having gone up to the station already with a commercial's



luggage ; and all the time I was considering, she stood twirling the paper round in her long fingers, in a way that made me giddy.

“ ‘ I think if it's a telegram I had better take it myself, Miss Maturin,’ I said at last.

“ And then she began thanking me and telling me how it was to the lawyer, who lived in London, and how he would have to travel perhaps all night.

“ ‘ I pray God he may be in time,’ she finished ; and I noticed how she sort of wrung her hands as she spoke.

“ And was he in time ?” asked Robert Ord, in a voice that startled the worthy landlord, it was so quick and intense in its eagerness.

“ Why no, sir ; leastways she never roused to full consciousness again. They did all they could. Mr. Tracy waited on and on, but it was no manner of use. They used to give out that she was reviving sometimes, and Miss Maturin would come flying down the garden for Mr. Tracy, and take him up to the poor lady ; but as soon as ever they spoke to her she was back again in the stupor, and so it went on to the last.”

“ Has Mr. Tracy been here ever since ?”

“ Oh no, sir ; he went up to London directly afterwards, and only returned in time for the funeral. I think he had some idea of finding you here.”



"True; but I was away from home, and received his letters too late. Thank you very much, Mr. Morison, for all you have told me. I will not trouble you with any more questions. I can wait for any further particulars till Mr. Tracy returns." The landlord rose at the hint. "And you do not wish to see Miss Maturin, sir?"

"I have no objection if she wishes it; perhaps I may be of some use to her. She is placed in very unfortunate circumstances. Any lady would feel such a position keenly, especially as I am afraid from what you tell me that she is without friends."

"Not a creature belonging to her in the world, sir."

"And she is young, you say?"

"About one-and-twenty, sir."

"Hum, old enough to take care of herself. Well, Mr. Morison, I think I shall be glad of those refreshments you offered me before."

"You shall have them at once, sir. I will just give the chambermaid a message for Miss Maturin; and maybe she will come and speak to you herself."

Robert Ord nodded, and the door closed on his host. He gave a genuine sigh of relief when he was left alone, and walked once or twice across the room with the air of one who had shaken off a burden. But his freedom

was of short duration, for the door again opened, and a respectable-looking young woman entered.

"Miss Maturin desires her compliments, sir, and thanks you for your kind message. But she is very sorry to say that she cannot possibly see you till the evening, as she is suffering from a bad sick headache."


"Nothing was further from my thoughts than disturbing Miss Maturin, I assure you," replied Mr. Ord, drily, as though he were slightly annoyed. "I only offered my services, hearing from the landlord that the lady was without friends in a strange place."

"Yes, sir; Miss Maturin understood that, and she is extremely obliged to you; she desired me also to say that she hopes you will make use of your aunt's sitting-room, as the inn is very full, and it is quite at your disposal."

"Thank you; I may take advantage of her kindness for a few hours," he replied a little less stiffly, but half disposed to refuse the thoughtful offer; nevertheless it was curious that this continual mention of his aunt's companion affronted him. "I wish people would not drag in other people's affairs in the middle of one's private business," he said, fuming to himself as soon as he was left alone. "What in the world is Miss Maturin to me, or I to Miss Maturin? That's the worst of talking to a garrulous land-

lord. I declare I am quite sick of the woman's name."

The coldness and hauteur of his manners had not been lost on the chambermaid, who was as quick to observe as the rest of her class ; for in retailing the short interview afterwards to Miss Maturin, she described Robert Ord as the proudest as well as the handsomest gentleman she had ever set eyes on—a double exaggeration, seeing that there were many men handsomer and prouder even than he. Not but that he was a good-looking man enough, possessing those elements of manly beauty which are sufficiently attractive to the feminine eye. He was tall, and well though rather slenderly built, and his face was decidedly prepossessing, though a physiognomist might have found fault with his mouth—the lips were too thin, and closed over each other so firmly as to give an expression almost of hardness to his otherwise pleasant features. One seemed to feel in looking at him that his firmness was a fault, that he could be a loving friend but a bitter enemy, and no one's enemy more than his own. And yet there was something about the man that must, in either character, win your respect. He was so honest and so terribly in earnest. Women always liked Robert Ord, though they feared him a little ; and good men valued his opinions. But perhaps the best criterion of all, little children



loved and clung to him, and even dumb animals followed him about, and with unerring instinct seemed to know he was their friend.



He was sorely in need of refreshments by the time they arrived, and did ample justice to the excellent fare set before him, but as soon as his repast was over, he strolled to the window-seat again, more in the hope of enjoying a little fresh air than of seeing any special objects of interest.

"I always thought Blackscar the dreariest place imaginable," he said half-aloud, as he leant his elbows on the sill and looked over the sunny market-place, "but one has the sea there, with its perpetual changes, but this Barnard Castle looks as though it has gone to sleep for a score of years and has not begun to wake up yet. A nice little nest for an idle man perhaps—nay, even as the landlord of the King's Arms existence might be endurable here—but not to a restless Ord, unless it be Austin." And here he broke off, as though too indolent this hot summer's afternoon to carry on any consecutive train of thought, and stared instead at an enormous placard opposite him, containing the astounding information that on that very evening might be seen one of the most remarkable wonders of the world—the Blue and Hairless Horse, at the ridiculous sum of one penny, children half-price.

"I suppose he has fallen into some lime-pit

by accident and then got painted, but all the same, those louts of lads will go and believe in him, so much for the innocent credulity of the Barnard Castlers;" and then he leant out farther, as a little equipage rattled over the stones and stopped at a neighbouring tin-shop; it was rather an odd-looking turn-out, a low carriage drawn by a pair of fat sleepy mules, with a huge tawny St. Bernard dog keeping them company. There was a jingle of little bells about it too. A lady in a large straw hat was driving a tall gentleman; there was quite a small crowd round them, and the tin-man looked obsequious. Robert Ord found out afterwards that it was the owner of Rokeby. After that came a cream-coloured performing pony, led by a foreigner and escorted by small boys; they disappeared down a dark entry however, and the small boys dispersed with a general whoop of disappointment to reassemble presently in hot pursuit of a Punch and Judy show; the place was quiet enough after that; the pigeons strutted again in the sunshine, and only a solitary factory girl, with the usual shawl over her head, passed listlessly along.

"I think I've had enough of this," said Robert Ord, suddenly rousing himself. "It is cooler now; suppose I go and have a look at the Castle gardens, and perhaps at the Castle itself; it is better to ventilate one's thoughts when they are as heavy as mine."



And being a man of energy, Robert Ord was as good or better than his word, for he not only saw the ruined Castle, with its hermit's chamber, and the cell where through the slit in the wall the unhappy prisoner could view the enchanting landscape with its noble river below, but he perambulated the town itself, and after having counted the inns and alehouses in the High Street, which reached the shady side of twenty, and explored the factory quarters, with its bridges and grimy river, he returned to the King's Arms, and having made friends with the apoplectic-looking waiter, was conducted by him across a stone yard and through a side gate into the far-famed Castle garden.

"Mr. Morison is very proud of his garden, sir," the waiter had assured him; and as he strolled on after thanking him, he was fain to acknowledge that Mr. Morison had something of which he might justly be proud.

Beautiful old-fashioned gardens they were, lying within the ruins, homely enough, but brimful of sunshine and sweet-smelling old fashioned flowers, none the less lovely that they bloomed in the same plot of ground with apple-trees, cabbages, and gooseberry bushes.


He had never seen such a profusion of flowers anywhere; they might be counted by hundreds; there was a perfect blaze of colour in the sunshine, and great brown bees were humming about

them and filling their honey-bags as though rejoicing in the bounteous harvest.

Flowers, flowers everywhere; great clumps of golden-hearted lilies, looking, as they are, the white queens of the garden, and behind them, like ranks of sentinels, tall, dazzling hollyhocks; roses, delicious creamy tea-roses, and rich crimson ones, some of them deeply, darkly purple; pale pinky roses hanging in clusters like tinted cups, blush and white roses—there was no end to them anywhere; they festooned the walls in company with the fruit trees and thrived in every border, bushes of them bloomed on the ruined walls themselves, or made inroads on the gravel paths.

There were great orange beds of *Eschscholtzias* and lupins, blue, rose, and yellow, plenty of climbing convolvuli and marigolds of all sorts, double daisies and stocks, and trails of rich dark nasturtiums, with homely sweet-peas running to seed; flowers that brought back to you the garden of your childhood's days, when a bush of southern-wood was your delight, and monkshood, sweet William, and yellow-eyed pansies were the rarest flowers you knew.

Robert Ord dearly loved old associations, and flowers were his especial delight, and as he strolled down the wide gravel paths and under the sunny walls, he felt brighter than he had done for many a day; for, to say the truth, Robert



Ord was a disappointed man, he had missed his share of this world's good things somehow, and the world had in consequence turned rather a cold shoulder on him. The star of the Ords was not just now in the ascendant ; people had begun to say of them that they were poor and proud, and might have managed better if they had only bent those obstinate wills of theirs a little, and learnt to be humble. But it was a lesson no Ord had ever yet learnt, and so they had gone on their ways chewing the bitter cud of experience with a sorry face or a cheerful one according to their several natures ; and a little hardness had crept into Robert's heart, the good things of this world had been promised him and then had been suddenly withdrawn, and he had grown sore with longing for them ; but none the less did he feel some stirrings of hope within him, that brighter days might be in store for him and his. He had felt it as he alighted from his hurried journey and stepped into the dust and sunshine, and he felt it still more as he walked between the gay coloured bushes, and looked across at the blue-black ruins of Barnard Castle with a pile of amethyst and scarlet clouds behind them.

He had stopped for a moment to lean on the little gate that connects the upper and lower gardens, when the slow rustle of a dress attracted his attention ; and looking up he saw a lady



coming round the angle of the wall, evidently towards him. She did not see him till he had opened the gate for her to pass ; then she bowed slightly with a quiet well-bred air, but without raising her eyes. He had just time to notice that she was tall, very young, and dressed in rather deep mourning, before a sudden and most unaccountable impulse made him lift his head and say—

“ I beg your pardon, but are you not Miss Maturin ? ”


She was passing him as he spoke ; perhaps the abruptness of the question startled her, for she hesitated, seemed painfully confused, and at last stammered out in the lowest voice he had ever heard—

“ Yes ; I am Miss Maturin. Did you wish to speak to me ? I suppose—that is—I believe I am addressing Mr. Ord.”

“ Robert Ord at your service.”

“ I thought so ; I was sorry I could not meet you as you wished, in the earlier part of the day. I only came out now to see if the air would do my head good ; ” she spoke quickly, with a flurry and indistinctness in her words, which made them nearly inaudible ; and the nervous trembling of her hands spoke volumes.

“ She is very young, and is afraid of me,” thought Robert Ord ; and he answered her in his pleasantest tones, as though to re-assure her.



"Yes, there is nothing so painful and depressing as a bad sick headache. I have had hundreds in my time, and know how trying they are to bear. This cool evening air will do you good, Miss Maturin; suppose, as we have met one another so opportunely, that we have our little interview out here in this lovely old garden, it will be ten times better than that stuffy little room upstairs, and I have so many questions to ask about my poor aunt."

"Have you? Yes, we will stop out here if you like," she returned, looking round her in a helpless sort of way, that made Mr. Ord think she was meditating an escape. He could not help scrutinizing her narrowly as she stood there under the low apple trees—a tall, slim creature, in her black dress, with a lace kerchief tied over her brown hair, and a face so young and so surprisingly pale that it moved him to pity in spite of himself. He had just made up his mind that she was not at all good-looking, and that she was very unhappy, when she looked up at him with a pair of soft, troubled eyes and said—

"If you have questions to ask, of course I will stay and answer them; but I thought, perhaps, you would wait for Mr. Tracy."

"Mr. Tracy cannot tell me all I want, Miss Maturin. Forgive me if I am too cruel in keeping you when you are evidently in need of quiet; but my time is short. A few hours is all

I can spare from my business, and my talk with Mr. Tracy must be of a far different character."

"Yes, I know," she answered, with a little shiver, and turning paler than ever, "it must be all so sad for you. Ah, why have you come so late? We did what we could, Mr. Ord; indeed we did, but it was all too late."

"I could not come before," he returned, anxious to defend himself, and wondering at her exceeding agitation. "I was travelling for our firm, and Mr. Tracy's letter never reached me; and as ill-luck would have it, neither of my brothers could come either, for Garton had hurt his foot, and Austin could find no one to take his duty. Then the funeral took place yesterday. Was the will opened then, Miss Maturin?"

"Yes, Mr. Ord."

"Who was present?"

"Only Mr. Tracy, Mr. Compton the clergyman, and myself; the other executor could not come."

"Who is the other executor?" he asked anxiously; but she interrupted him, almost in distress.

"It is Mr. Morrell or Murrell—I don't know which; but please don't ask me any more about that, Mr. Tracy will tell you," and putting her hand to her head, "I am so confused—oh, so dreadfully confused with it all."

"Tell me something about my aunt's illness,"

he said kindly, and putting aside his evident desire to know more ; for Robert Ord was very tender over weakness, and very chivalrous and courteous to all womenkind, and this shy, timid girl excited his compassion. His soothing tone seemed to give her confidence, for she brightened up somewhat ; and by dint of frequent questioning and an encouraging word or two, he was soon put into possession of all the facts connected with his aunt's long mental illness—an illness aggravated by restlessness, and resulting in the break-up of all her vital powers.

“It seems so dreadful for her to have died at an inn, with only hirelings round her,” finished Miss Maturin ; “if her old friend Mr. Tracy had not been near her, I should have said it was almost too sad.”

“I should think you must have been an old friend yourself by this time, Miss Maturin ; you have been three or four years with her.”

“Nearly four. I know I tried to do my duty to her. I wish now that I had not tried quite so hard ; no, you will not understand me, Mr. Ord, but she seemed so lonely, poor thing, and so bitter with some secret trouble, that one could not help pitying her, and trying to make her life a little less unbearable to herself and others. I did not mean to say that, God knows ; she was my only friend, and I miss her”—and Miss Maturin wiped away a few quiet tears

in a way that touched the young man to the heart.

"Are you so wholly without friends then?" he asked gently.

"I have not anyone belonging to me in the world," was the sad answer.

"Pardon me; not a sister, not a brother?"

"No; I was an only child."

"Tell me some more about yourself; that is, if you do not mind," he said, with quite an elder brotherly feeling towards this young girl, thrown so suddenly and so unprotected on the world; "not that we Ords have much interest; but I know some good women who would go very far out of their way to assist one of their own sex."

She smiled gratefully at that; and then, as though his kindness had won her from her timidity, she told him in a few simple words, all the more pathetic that they were so few and simple, the particulars of her poor little story.

She told him how she had been the only child of an Indian officer, who had died while on his voyage home on sick leave, and how in two or three short years her mother had followed him, leaving her a lonely child of ten: how they had left a little sum of money for her maintenance and education; and when that was exhausted, she had become a pupil-teacher in the same school where she had been educated, from which drudgery Mrs. Ord had rescued her.

"I was only seventeen then," concluded Miss Maturin, "but I was doing the work of two people. When I look back, I do not know which was worst, that school life or the years that came after. I don't think"—clasping her hands with a movement that seemed habitual to her—"I don't think I ever had a friend in the world except the music-mistress, Mrs. Carruthers, and she was good to me. I see now that Mrs. Ord liked me and meant to be kind; but how could I have guessed it—how could I—how could I?"

The nervous flurry of manner had returned, and as she spoke these last words she looked so faint, that Robert Ord at once proposed they should return to the inn.

"I will see you again to-morrow," he said, holding out his hand with a friendly look as they parted in the hall. "I shall not leave very early in the morning after all, and I shall expect you to tell me what I can do to help you."

"Thank you, thank you gratefully for all your kindness," she answered; but either she did not, or would not see his hand.

Robert Ord watched her gliding up the staircase like a black shadow, and then he turned the handle of his door with a brief sigh and went in.

## CHAPTER II.

## ROBERT ORD STATES HIS OPINION.

“O false my friend!  
False, false, a random charge, a blame undue;  
Wrest not fair reasoning to a crooked end:  
False, false, as you are true!”

JEAN INGELow.

ROBERT ORD had expected to find the little room as empty as when he left it; he was greatly surprised therefore to see a grey-haired gentleman with a florid face busily writing at the centre table; in the dim light he had some difficulty in recognising him, till he pushed back his chair and came forward with outstretched hand.

“Good evening, Mr. Ord.”

“Good evening, Mr. Tracy; you have taken me quite by surprise. I had no idea that you had returned.”

“My dear sir, a thousand apologies for keeping you so long waiting; here I have been gallivanting all day with a party to Deepdale—ought to have known better at my age—time is money to a business man. Never expected you for a moment—why did not you telegraph?”

“True, so I might,” returned Robert Ord.

"Might ! I should think so. 'If he means to come he'll send a telegram,' thought I ; 'and if not, I shall be off to London to-morrow.' What were you doing at Glasgow ?"

"Something wrong with our machinery, and they sent on my letter instead of opening it—that's Gar all over—and so, of course, there was no way of being present yesterday."

"I supposed business had kept you: couldn't the parson come, either ?"

"Who—Austin ? No ; just at the last minute he couldn't find any one to take his duty. I believe there was a wedding and a funeral on for that day."

"Humph ! just as well, perhaps, as things have turned out," returned the lawyer, taking out his snuff-box and tapping it nervously. "Of course we were obliged to open the will."

"So Miss Maturin informed me."

"What ! have you seen Miss Maturin ?" asked Mr. Tracy, in a tone of unfeigned astonishment. "I thought she told me that nothing would induce her to see you. Well, women are queer creatures to manage—tell you one thing and do the other. So she told you about the will, eh ?"

"No, sir ; she referred me to you."

"Oh, she did, did she ? thought she was going to save me an awkward piece of business," said Mr. Tracy, ruffling up his grey hair in a way peculiar to himself—it was harsh hair, and



made a grating sort of sound. "Crump took down all the particulars of the will—our oldest client, sir—never understood why she sent for my partner instead of myself—understand it now ; rather a hard customer she was to deal with—plaguy hard, I should say ;" and he rapped his snuff-box thoughtfully on the table before he took a pinch. "Pray, Mr. Ord, if it be not asking too downright a question, was your aunt on such very bad terms with you and the rest of your family?"

"I am sorry to hear you asking that question, Mr. Tracy ; it sounds ominous. She was on the worst possible terms with us all, sir."

"Humph ! thought so ;" taking another pinch. "Couldn't comprehend it otherwise—had always heard she had educated and made so much of her three nephews — brought them up, in fact, as though they were her own sons."

"So she did till the last four years. But, look here, Mr. Tracy, doesn't it strike you that we are beating about the bush a good deal ? it does not require much penetration to see that you have no very good news to give me. What is the good of all this preamble ; of course, my aunt has left all her money to a charitable institution?"

He spoke quietly, but there was an anxious, almost an eager look about his face ; he had told himself coming along that he had little or

no hope, and that whatever disappointment might await him, he would bear it like a man ; but he knew now that hope had been strong within him, that he had coveted that money as earnestly as he knew how to covet anything—all the more that it had once been within his lawful grasp before misunderstandings had arisen and the Ord pride had estranged them ; and now his heart was growing heavy and sore within him, for Mr. Tracy's jovial face looked graver and longer than he had ever seen it.

"I suppose she has endowed some orphanage or hospital, or left funds for building another church ; she was largely given to such good works," he continued, trying to speak lightly, but failing utterly.

"I wish to Heaven Miss Maturin had told you herself," said the lawyer, rubbing his hands fretfully.

"My good sir, what has Miss Maturin to do with the subject?"

"Unfortunately, Mr. Ord, she has everything to do with it. Your aunt has left her the whole of her property." Robert Ord started from his seat, with an exclamation rather strong than polite.

"Now do be calm, my dear sir—pray be calm ;" and the lawyer took three pinches in succession, as he watched him nervously. "I can't tell you how heartily grieved I am for your disappointment, but pray be calm."

"The whole of her property, Mr. Tracy!—impossible."

"Every penny, I give you my word; every stick and straw, except a large donation to the fishermen, and a munificent bequest to the Convalescent Hospital. Of course there are minor legacies to servants and executors, and she has not forgotten two or three old pensioners; but the bulk of her property, in houses and funded property, with Bryn and all its furniture, plate, &c., amounting to about five thousand a year, goes solely and entirely to Miss Maturin."

"Miss Maturin—good heavens! Miss Maturin!" And Robert Ord's expression was not pleasant to see.

"Mr. Tracy, on my word of honour as a gentleman, I will never believe my aunt intended to do us this deadly wrong."

"Tush, my dear sir. I have the exact copy of the will before me now; you may read it for yourself in black and white," and he pushed the papers towards Robert Ord. "Look it over; you will find the instrument correct and valid enough. Crump knew what he was about when he drew up that document—and a rascally document it is," muttered the lawyer, as he turned towards the window. He was a good-natured man, softer-hearted than many of his class, and the sight of the young man's pale face moved him to pity. "He has played his cards as badly as a man

could play them," he said to himself; "those Ords are all alike—they never know what is good for them; there's not one of the three could manage a cantankerous old woman; but all the more, it is a grievous pity this fine young man should be the loser. Humph! I should like to know the rights of it." And he was still turning the matter over in his mind when Robert Ord threw the paper from him with a gesture of anger and disgust.

"Mr. Tracy, I shall dispute that will. As sure as I am standing here I shall do it."

"On what grounds, Mr. Ord?"

"On the grounds of insanity—imbecility, if you like. My aunt was not in her sane mind when she dictated that will."

"Fudge, my dear sir."

"Mr. Tracy!"

"Come, come, this is going too far; do let us be reasonable. Of course I agree with you that it is a confounded shame—that, morally speaking, the young woman has no more right to the money than I have, and a more unjust will was never executed; but when you talk of disputing the validity of the document, you are simply flying in the face of reason."

"Never mind, I will go to law; I will have the thing properly sifted. What right had she to disinherit her lawful nephews without cause, for the sake of a designing stranger?"

"Mr. Ord, my good sir——"

"It is no use dissuading me, Mr. Tracy. I have made up my mind. I will talk the matter over with Austin, and he will agree with me."

"I think better of the parson than that."

"What! you think he will not fight the thing out with me? You are mistaken, sir."

"No, no, Mr. Ord; I think better of him and of you than that. Go to law, indeed! Why, you have not a leg to stand upon."

"How so?" asked Robert Ord. His excitement was cooling a little before the lawyer's phlegm.

"Why, in the first place, the costs would ruin you; and, in the next place, you would gain nothing. Ask any lawyer, he would tell you the same. Granted that it is a most unjust will; but, after all, I suppose the deceased lady had a right to do what she liked with her own."

"I deny that my aunt was in her reasonable senses when she dictated that document."

"Will you undertake to prove that, Mr. Ord? No, no, let us glance at the main facts of the case. Here is a lady with—with——" Here the lawyer hesitated for a word. "Well, let us say a decidedly unpleasant temper, variable and capricious as the winds, and full of all sorts of jealous fancies. Well, this lady brings up her

nephews, treats them in a way like her own sons, and finally adopts one and makes him her heir. By-and-by, misunderstandings arise; there's coolness, first with one and then with another of the brothers—all on account of this plaguy temper, and that cursed Ord pride—no insanity, mind you, ever having been known in the family; presently there's ill blood between her and the heir, and she there and then refuses to have any more to do with him—that's some years ago—they don't meet again; and when the will is opened, he finds she has only left him her forgiveness and a blessing. Isn't that the long and the short of it, Mr. Ord?"

"Yes, sir; I believe you have stated it pretty correctly."

"Well, how can you make out your case for presuming the deceased was of unsound mind? Crump will tell you she was never clearer and better than when she dictated the points of that will, looked as hale and hearty as though she would live till eighty—was terribly irascible with him to be sure, and rapped on the table with her gold-headed cane every time he ventured on a remonstrance. Never had such an interview in his life; it quite aged him."

"You really think I cannot contest the will?" asked Robert Ord, hopelessly."

"My dear sir, it would be the maddest thing you ever did in your life, even to attempt such a

thing. 'Pon my word your aunt was a most unaccountable creature though—here she led that poor girl a sad life of it, every one says so ; and then goes and leaves her all her money as though to make up for it."

"Poor girl indeed ! Who ever would have thought my aunt could have been so duped, and she such an acute woman too ?"

"What do you mean by that, may I ask ?"

"Now, Mr. Tracy, is it possible that you can be so simple as not to see there must have been some undue influence at work ? I could not have believed that any one so young and so seemingly simple could have been so designing."

"There, she said you would say so—she said you would take it like this ;" and the lawyer rubbed up his hair with vexation till it stood on end all round like a grey halo. "I can well understand you feel inclined to play at fisticuffs with the world in general for having used you so badly, but when it comes to speaking ill of that poor young woman because she has innocently defrauded you of your aunt's property, I must say, Mr. Ord, I hardly expected it of you."

"I suppose she has talked you over, sir," sneered Robert Ord. "Ah, I can see it all now ; no wonder she dreaded to meet me. No wonder she could not look me in the face and answer my questions—fool that I was to be gulled by all that seeming simplicity."

"Mr. Ord, you are cruelly misjudging that poor girl."

"Of course, Mr. Tracy, if you are going to take up cudgels in her defence, I have no more to say ; but I should have thought a lawyer the last man to be deceived by fair specious words. Miss Maturin is nothing to me, but I should have certainly liked a different sort of neighbour at Bryn ; it is rather too close to the Vicarage to be pleasant."

"Upon my word I pity that young creature coming into the midst of you," returned the lawyer, warmly ; "that was a cruel provision of the will obliging her to live at Bryn. When we read it out to her, she went as white as that tablecloth, sir.' 'What ! I shall have to face them day after day, and day after day ?' she said, turning to me. 'Mr. Tracy, it is too dreadful, I cannot do it. I shall feel as though I have robbed them of their money. I have no right to it, none at all ; and they are all so poor you tell me.'"

"We are much obliged to Miss Maturin for her commiseration," returned Robert Ord, haughtily, stung by the concluding words.

"My dear sir, do let me proceed ; it is my duty to remove this suspicion if I can. We had some trouble to make her understand that she was sole legatee ; she kept interrupting us by telling us that she was sure Mrs. Ord had re-



pented of her injustice, and that she had meant to make another will in favour of her nephew Robert; and at last she got so urgent that we were obliged to ask her reasons for what she said."

"Well?" asked Mr. Ord, eagerly, as the lawyer paused.

"Well, it seems about a week before her death Mrs. Ord let fall some words about the final disposition of her property which excited Miss Maturin's suspicion, and she begged her to tell her more, but she would not. She only asked her jestingly how she would feel if she woke up one morning and found herself a rich woman; and when she said that, it came upon her all of a sudden that some injustice was going to be done, and then and there she begged and prayed Mrs. Ord not to leave her any money, or not more than would keep her from drudgery all her life; and she implored her by all she held sacred not to leave the world bearing a grudge against anyone, and least of all her own flesh and blood. I don't know what more she said, but she told us that Mrs. Ord seemed much shaken by her words, and not a little touched. She patted her kindly on the head, she was kneeling by her at the time, and promised she would think over it; and she was not to fear for herself, for she would see that she was remembered; and, later on in the night, just as she was dropping off to sleep, Mrs. Ord woke her and said she was a good

girl, and that she might send for Mr. Tracy if she liked, for she had made up her mind now, for she knew she had committed a great mistake, and she would see that everything was righted."

"Go on," murmured Mr. Ord, hoarsely, as soon as Mr. Tracy leant forward to refresh himself with another pinch.

"All right, my dear sir ; I thought you would be interested. Well, when the morning came there was a change for the worse—a sort of lethargy or stupor seemed creeping over her—and when the doctor came it was his opinion that she was not far from her end. Then it was that Miss Maturin sent for me, stating that she had reasons for believing that the poor lady wished to alter her will. She was rather incoherent in her expressions. I was a stranger to her, you see ; but I gathered from her excitement that there was some great interest at stake. Well, I did what I could ; and, what with her being our oldest client and having large dealings with our firm, and my not having much work on hand, and being rather disposed to loiter in a strange place, I just stayed on a day or two hoping for a lucid interval, but none came. She would revive a minute or two and then the death-like stupor would return, and so it was all of no use."

"She never rallied?"

"Not for more than a few minutes at a time.

Miss Maturin used to fetch me up to her room, but it was fighting against fate; and so we found when we came to open the will and saw how things were left.

"Good Heavens! I thought Miss Maturin would have been beside herself when I read it. She would hardly listen to us when we congratulated her. She hated money, she said, and this great millstone should not be hanged about her neck. She was for delivering up the whole to you, sir; and when we proved to her that that was impossible, she insisted on a fair division. But you see for yourself, Mr. Ord, how such an arrangement is guarded against in a special clause of the will, and how the executors are bound over to see that the property, without division, is for the sole use of Rotha Maturin, and her heirs for ever."

"A monstrous injustice! Mr. Crump ought to have refused to have drawn up such a will."

"Why? She would only have employed the nearest lawyer; and Crump saw no good in offending a rich client. She might have had a harder customer to deal with in me. I am rather given to plain speaking in such matters. I have known the Ords off and on for a score of years, and I would not have seen them so cruelly wronged if I could have helped it."

"Thank you, Mr. Tracy; I am sure of your sympathy."

"Why, you may be sure of that, my dear sir, and welcome; and if there be anything I can do for you at any time—short of contesting the will—I will gladly do it. One thing I must confess, that I am rather curious to know what led to this final breach; if it be not trenching too much on private matters?"

"My aunt never enlightened you then?"

"No, she got to be rather close with me during the last few years of her life. I suppose, as I just hinted, I was too plain spoken for her. I know the parson put his foot in it by marrying a young lady without any fortune; that was just after Mrs. Ord had endowed the church, and so he never got his new Vicarage."

"There, that was just one of my aunt's inconsistencies; she was lavish of her money, always giving it away in large sums, which impoverished her property, and then she insisted on our marrying rich wives to repair the breaches as it were. Who ever heard of such despotism? Austin was the first to rebel, and so it was all up with him."

"But the parson was never the prime favourite, Mr. Robert?"

"No, he was too downright and outspoken. She could not bear his sermons, as she called them. Did you ever see his wife, Mr. Tracy?"

"To be sure I have, when I called at the Vicarage one day; a pretty bright-coloured

girl, very pleasant spoken, and every inch a lady."

"Oh, that's many years ago ; she looks worn now. No wonder, with four boys and a small income to manage. You were asking me just now how I fell into disgrace. Well, that was all Mary's fault."

"Mary ; that's Mrs. Austin, I suppose ?"

"Yes, the vicaress as we call her. Her mother, Mrs. Clinton, died, and she and Austin, not being poor enough already, must needs have her sister to live with them."

"Humph ! I begin to see light."

"To be sure you do. Of course Belle and I fell in love with each other, and as she is ten times prettier than her sister, that's only natural. I think you might travel half the world over before you find two such good women anywhere."

"No doubt, no doubt, Mr. Robert, but all the same it was a crazy move of yours."

"Of course it was suicidal, but I was almost as blind as men in my position usually are. I dare say if I had foreseen everything I should have acted just the same. I could not have helped myself ; but I certainly had no idea at the time that my aunt had already chosen a wife for me. You have heard of Mr. Ramsay, of Stretton, Mr. Tracy, the great ironmaster. He was worth—I should be afraid to say how many thousands—and he had an only daughter. This young lady

was destined by my aunt to be the future mistress of Bryn. And if my affections had not been already engaged, she would not have chosen ill for me, for Emma Ramsay was a sweet-looking creature, and most amiable and accomplished ; but as I had already proposed to Belle, I was not specially thankful when this paragon was offered for my acceptance. I suspect her father rather wished the match, as well as my aunt. Well, sir, I believe you know my aunt's peculiarities, and I will leave to your imagination the scene that followed when I told her Belle and I were engaged. You spoke just now of the Ord pride in not very complimentary terms, if I remember rightly ; it was well up then I assure you, and there were bitter words spoken on both sides—not quite pleasant to remember now. It ended in my refusing to give up Belle, or to take Miss Ramsay on any terms, and that night I shook off the dust of Bryn with no very enviable feelings."

" Did Mrs. Ord disinherit you then ?"

" Virtually I suppose she did, for she vowed that if I married Belle Clinton I should never touch a penny of her money. Of course Austin tried to patch up the matter and make peace between us, but that only widened the breach, for she told him it was all his own and his wife's fault—they had tried to get up the match to spite her, and that she never wished to see an Ord's face again."

"Poor lady! that was when she came up to London. I thought she looked ten years older when I saw her."

"Yes, she shut up Bryn at once, and before any of us knew what she was about she had taken a house in London. Austin wanted me to go after her—fancy that; Garton went, but they never had got on well together, and she would not have anything to say to him. He came back looking rather the worse for London air, I can tell you."

"And you never attempted a personal reconciliation, Mr. Ord?"

"Faith, no. What was the good of bringing flint and steel together? I tried writing once, but the answer I received did not encourage me to proceed with the correspondence. She would only make peace on her own terms, and as that involved my giving up Belle, of course I would not listen to them; and so it went on from bad to worse. But I don't think we any of us quite thought that she would carry her animosity beyond death." And Robert Ord's face darkened as he remembered that bitter will.

"How is it she never got on with your brother Garton?"

"Oh, that is easily accounted for. Garton never would put up with her queer speeches. He was always letting her see that he despised her vagaries, and saying some blunt thing or

other that hurt her feelings. Gar always was under a cloud, as it were. She had not any patience with his wish to be a clergyman—one was quite enough in any family, she said; and so there was never any sympathy between them. It was a pity, because Garton would have suited her best in the end. Good Heavens! what a miserable world it is for general crookedness and misunderstandings.”

“I daresay you feel it so now. It is very hard for an idle man, brought up in luxury, to have to put his hand suddenly to the plough.”

“Yes, a managing clerk’s place at two hundred a year is not a very lively prospect after four years’ work, especially when one has to partially keep one’s brother.”

“You see no chance of maintaining a wife just now, I am afraid?”

“No, confound it! it is that that makes me feel so badly about it all,” and Robert Ord’s voice took a hard bitter tone. “It is hard lines for Belle and me. Here we have been engaged four years, and shall probably remain so for four more. No hope of a rise just now—when there are two sons coming into the business—unless by a lucky chance. It is wearing us both out, I believe; for of course a man cannot bear such a heap of troubles quite patiently. Well, Mr. Tracy, I think I have bothered you enough with our family history. Suppose, as we are



sitting in total darkness, that we ring for lights and a cup of coffee."

"With all my heart, my dear sir," returned Mr. Tracy, pulling the bell. "Thank you, thank you for all your confidence. I confess I was curious to learn the rights of this painful case, and in return I trust that I have removed your unhappy suspicion of poor Miss Maturin."

Mr. Ord remained silent.

"Come, sir; acknowledge that you have been rather too hard upon her."

"I don't think a man can be expected to be otherwise than hard when he sees all the good things of this world snatched suddenly away from him."

"Of course not, of course not; but I do hope, Mr. Ord, that you will make things a little less unbearable for her when she comes among you."

"Sir! I hope always to remember that she is a lady," returned Robert Ord, in his most high and mighty manner.

"There, that's an Ord all over. Why, bless my soul, however do you manage to get on in the world at all, Mr. Robert. There, forgive an old man's pertinacity, for the girl interests me somehow. Do not let her see that you harbour this unjust suspicion of her. Mark my words, my dear sir, it will just break her down."

"I am afraid she must put up with a general coolness. I am very sorry, Mr. Tracy, as she is

a pet *protégée* of yours, but I cannot help it. I can't feel that my aunt would have left her all that money if she had not been toadying for it more or less. She may be quite innocent as you say, but a man is bound to have his own opinion, and I have mine. There, let us change the subject; my head aches so confoundedly, that I think I will go out for a stroll to get a little fresh air."

## CHAPTER III.

## EGLISTONE ABBEY.

“What prospects, from his watch-tower high,  
 Gleam gradual on the warder's eye!—  
 Far sweeping to the east, he sees  
 Down his deep woods the course of Tees,  
 And tracks his wanderings by the steam  
 Of summer vapours from the stream.

Then in broad lustre shall be shewn  
 That mighty trench of living stone,  
 And each huge trunk that from the side,  
 Reclines him o'er the darksome tide,  
 Where Tees, full many a fathom low,  
 Wears with his rage no common foe;  
 For pebbly bank, nor sand-bed here,  
 Nor clay-mound, checks his fierce career,  
 Condemned to mine a channell'd way  
 O'er solid sheets of marble grey.”

SCOTT'S *Rokeby*.

ROBERT ORD was in no very placable mood the next morning, his long solitary walk in the darkness had been followed by a wakeful miserable night; anxious thoughts had stared him in the face and kept him company, and he had failed to combat them with his usual courage. Bitter feelings such as he had never experienced before filled his veins with fever, and stirred him to impotent anger; courage and hope were at their lowest ebb. And when he had succeeded in obtaining momentary oblivion, it was dearly purchased at the expense of harassing nightmares.

He arose with the morning light jaded and unrefreshed, to find a new source of annoyance awaiting him.

"Things always go by contraries in this world, at least they do with me," he observed, as he and Mr. Tracy sat down to breakfast together in the coffee-room. "There's a pleasant sort of letter for a man to receive just as he is longing to shake off the dust of a place from him."

"What's the matter now? Hum, letters of advice to Darlington. Darlington? Why, that's not much of a distance. Only a matter of sixteen miles from here—is it?"

"I shouldn't mind if it were sixty," was the grumbling answer. "It is not the distance to which I object; but just now I am not exactly in the humour to have a few idle hours on my hands."

"Why not deliver the letters at once then, and take an early train to Blackscar or Thornborough?"

"Impossible. Don't you see I have to confer with our junior partner, Mr. Clayton? Well, he was in Lancashire last night. He cannot be in Darlington I should judge till about nine this evening."

"Humph, I begin to understand; and it is not the sort of place where you would care to spend a solitary day."

"Well, not exactly; Mr. Broughton thinks it

probable that Mr. Clayton may bring us up news which may oblige me to return to Glasgow at a moment's notice. Anyhow my orders are stringent. We shall telegraph from Darlington and await their reply. Of course I shall pass the night there."

"And you will have your day to yourself. I wish I could keep you company, Mr. Robert, but I must be off by the eleven o'clock train."

"To London?"

Mr. Tracy nodded.

"Are you going to leave your *protégée* behind you, sir?" The sarcastic tone suited Robert Ord ill. Mr. Tracy rubbed up his hair as he heard it.

"If you mean by my *protégée* Miss Maturin, she will follow me to London in a day or two. I don't mind telling you that I have invited her to take up her residence for a little while in Manchester Square."

"At your house, Mr. Tracy?" and Robert Ord knitted his brow in surprise.

"Yes, at my house, sir; the house of your humble servant—have you any objection, Mr. Ord? I don't think she will quite contaminate my wife and daughters, sir."

"Probably not," was the curt answer. But Robert Ord winced a little nevertheless at the lawyer's irony.

"She has to hunt out a friend of hers in

London. That's her present purpose I believe. For as you may be aware, sir, a young creature can't live quite alone, and she wishes this Mrs. Carruthers to come and live with her. You may not do the poor young woman justice yourself, Mr. Robert, but I think even you must confess that she has a pretty clear notion of what is fitting in her position." To which piece of intelligence Robert Ord vouchsafed no manner of answer.

The conversation languished after this. Mr. Tracy took up his paper and was soon absorbed in the leading article, and Robert Ord, after wandering listlessly from the table to the windows, and observing that there were sullen-looking clouds about, and he would as lief be suffocated as take a walk on such a sultry morning, took up his hat and went out, after bidding him good-bye rather stiffly.

The day was before him. But though in his hard-working life holidays had been scarce with him, and idleness a thing unknown, he made no sort of plan for himself; he had taken a distaste to the whole place; he was in no mood to be charmed by natural beauty—nature in her sweetest aspect would have failed to soothe him. But as his restlessness goaded him to some sort of action, he went out, not caring whither he went.

He had gone down by the river the previous

evening, and he remembered a little weir which had pleased him with its cool splash and endless movement. Perhaps further on he might find shade and repose. And so he crossed the bridge again, and leaving the factories behind him, struck into a little footway across the green fields, which seemed to track the course of the river. But as he walked, the dense thundery air added to his oppression, and served to increase his brooding sadness. Two or three anglers looked up from their pleasant work in surprise at the tall handsome man striding so quickly under the trees, looking neither to the right nor the left. Business was alien to them just now, the humming gnats and great leaping trouts were more in unison with their holiday mood. Robert Ord glanced at them half in envy and half in contempt, and marvelled how the world had dealt with them ; that they could stand so happily on those smooth white boulders, looking down into the deep sunny pools for the silvery splash, which was just now the object of their thoughts.

One of them was a poor artisan with a disabled arm, a thin, sickly-looking man ; he was humming a Methodist hymn-tune as he mended his rod—a sturdy white dog was barking savagely at his own shadow in the water at his feet. Robert Ord noticed that his elbows were ragged, and by a queer transition of

mood tossed him a silver coin. The man took it up languidly, and thanked him in a subdued sort of way.

"There's a storm coming up, master; there's a taint of thunder in the air," he said, in a rough Yorkshire dialect. And then he went on with his tune. Robert Ord stood and envied him before he turned away. What a bad bitter mood was on him; as the old lawyer quaintly expressed it, he was just in the humour to play at fisticuffs with the world at large.


A great blow had just been dealt him, and he was by no means a man disposed at any time to turn the other cheek to his enemy; all such smittings were odious to him, and he was much given to show a very muscular sort of Christianity on such occasions. Mr. Tracy's generous defence of Miss Maturin had secretly exasperated him, and he had had some difficulty the previous night in concealing the fact that the whole tenor of the conversation had been insupportable to him. In his own mind he called him a fool for his credulity, and mocked at the old-fashioned chivalry that prompted him to go down in the lists. And being very slow at all times to yield up a preconceived idea, however erroneous, he was not likely to be won over even by the lawyer's eloquence, and least of all by his generous hospitality.

Young manhood, and especially disappointed



young manhood, we are told is apt to be censorious and harsh judging, and to take a one-sided view of erring human nature. Robert Ord in his virtuous hardness could not understand the lawyer's soft-hearted commiseration ; he was not a little proud of his own shrewdness and what he considered his far-sighted knowledge of the motives and actions of others. He chose to believe that Miss Maturin had gained influence over his aunt for her own purposes, and nothing short of a miracle would be ever likely to alter his opinion, and of course so judging, he was not disposed to hold out the sceptre of his favour to so hardened a sinner, because she had eloquent eyes and a soft voice.

No, that was not probable, and as he walked along he strengthened himself in his indignation all the more that the smart of his injuries was fresh upon him. She had coveted that money ; all those rich belongings had seemed desirable to her poverty. Very young women could be designing sometimes and scheme for their own benefit. Doubtless she had so schemed ; doubtless during those four years she had so ingratiated herself into her protectress' favour with her smooth subtle ways, that it was no wonder that she had forgotten her own flesh and blood, seeing that her own flesh and blood had so sinned against her. Her hands were not clean, so he told himself—not clean, that is, with an honest 'whiteness, and as he suffered no degrees of comparison in his mind,



he soon grew to believe that they were of absolute blackness, that her deceit was odious, and that any forgiveness on his part would be a reprehensible act of weakness.

It never occurred to him that he might be drawing a wrong conclusion, that it was possible that even his opinion might be mistaken, and that he was unjustly condemning the innocent. Such a thought never entered his mind for a moment; disappointment and the bitterness of his heart were blinding his reason, and silencing the dictates of his better nature. During the last few hours a moral earthquake seemed to have stirred the foundations of his being, bringing hidden things to light; the even tenor of his ways had been broken up, and his soul agitated by bitter and conflicting passions—envy, anger, and unavailing remorse; and before his upright nature had recovered its balance, a suspicion wholly mischievous and altogether unworthy of him, had crept into his heart and taken root there. “The devil fishes in troubled waters,” says an old saint, and there is terrible truth in the saying.

There are few gems without a flaw, comparatively few that is to say, and so it is with human nature. The time came when Robert Ord owned that he was more sinning than sinned against; when the scales of his own self-sufficiency fell from his eyes; when he saw clearly and judged righteously; when he owned that his pride and

his uncharitableness had wrought his troubles and marred so long the beauty of his life ; that he had himself to thank and no other ; and when in the subdued wisdom of his riper years he confessed " that it was good for him that he had been afflicted," and that he had gained his knowledge through the bitterness of experience.

He had reached the Abbey Bridge by this time ; about three-quarters of a mile beyond lay Rokeby, as he well knew, but he felt no sort of desire to see it. Already he had passed " Eglistone's grey ruins " unnoticed, and now he stood leaning his elbows on the stone battlements of the bridge, and looking moodily down into the bubbling river with eyes that saw nothing.

And yet the scene that lay before him was fair enough for a poet's dream : behind him was Eglistone, or, as the guide books have it, Athelstone or Egglestone Abbey, built on the angle formed by the little dell called Thorsgill, with the Tees.

In this Abbey Sir Walter Scott laid the closing scene of his " Rokeby."

From the Abbey Bridge one looks down the magnificent valley of the Tees, with its richly wooded banks ; the river itself flowing in a deep trench of solid rock, chiefly limestone and marble ; and from where Robert Ord stood the view was exquisitely beautiful, the whole course of the river was broken up by huge boulders of

snowy whiteness, over which the water bubbled and frothed in the sunshine with an endless fret.

By-and-by the noonday glare disturbed him, and he left the bridge and climbed down amongst the underwood to the very edge of the water; the smell of the cool dark vegetation refreshed him, and then he seated himself astride a low bough that hung over the water. He had set himself a task: he was looking things in the face as he called it, reviewing his past, present, and future—all the time that he was dropping the loose pebbles into the current and watching the tiny eddies in which they disappeared. The shiver of leaves and the wet splash of large drops on his face recalled him from this dreamy introspection, and the low growling of suppressed thunder warned him that a storm was impending. The air was close to suffocation and the clouds looked electric. He always keenly enjoyed a storm, and as he scrambled up the banks it came into his head that he would seek shelter in the Abbey ruins that towered a little way above him; it would be better than having to exchange civilities with the toll-gate keeper on the bridge.

The drops were coming down faster now, with an ominous pattering and splutter, and he was obliged to hasten his steps; but as he ran up the green slopes and was about to vault over the low palings, he saw to his chagrin that some one else, a female, had taken shelter in the same refuge.

For a moment he had half a mind to retrace his steps, and was turning round for the purpose, but on second thoughts he restrained his impulse. The rain was coming down now with a steady downpour that would have drenched him to the skin, and he saw that the person, or lady, whichever it might be, was standing vainly trying to shelter herself under a broken buttress: mere humanity prompted him to go to her assistance; Robert Ord was a gentleman both by instinct and education; in another minute he was beside her.

"You will get very wet if you stand under the ruined window," he said, courteously, as though to a perfect stranger, but at his first word she turned round and looked at him.

It was Miss Maturin.

She had evidently seen him coming up from the road, for his sudden appearance did not seem to surprise her. She looked up at him half timidly, half wistfully, as though she hoped that he would greet her; she even made a movement as though she would put out her hand to him, but something of sternness in his face forbade this.

"You here, of all places in the world, Miss Maturin!" And now it was impossible for her to mistake the surprised displeasure of his voice.

"Yes, I was down on the river bank, and the rain overtook me," she faltered.

"You have chosen a very poor refuge then," he returned; "there is a better shelter over there," and he pointed to a low range of out-buildings that skirted the Abbey.

But she hesitated a moment.

"Pray do not lose time or we shall have the storm upon us," he continued, impatiently. "You do not mind the wet grass I suppose."

She shook her head, and mutely pointed to her dripping dress, which was clinging round her in lank folds, and in another moment he had hurried her across the wide green, and they were standing together under the doorway of a ruined dwelling house.

"What a desolate place," he muttered, as he relieved her of her wet cloak, and bade her shake out her dress, after which he proceeded to eject a coal black heifer, evidently an occupant of the tenement. Several horned heads appeared from time to time, and seemed greatly astonished at being refused admittance.

"They have turned it into a cattle shed, I suppose," he continued, looking round at the crumbling walls and grateless fireplace of their undesirable refuge; and then, without waiting a reply, he picked his way among the mouldering bricks, and leant against the empty framework of the window.

It was not an exhilarating scene, and we can forgive Robert Ord if in his present mood he

looked at it with lowering brows, and wished himself a hundred miles away.

The whole place was misty with driving rain, the sky sullen and lurid; every now and then there was the glare and dazzle of sudden lightning, the tree tops looked grey and indistinct, the river ran molten, the cattle herded together under the projecting eaves, lowing their discontent with their sweet breath full on Robert Ord's face. Across the green space rose the grey old ruins; some birds had taken refuge in the great bare east window, and twittered and trimmed their wet plumage. Loose stones and mortar crackled down the yawning chimney where Miss Maturin stood shaking out the folds of her dress, and looking wistfully at him.

She had on a little straw hat, and she had tied it in gipsy fashion over her face, with a broad black ribbon; her face was paler, if possible, and there was a red swollen look about her eyes as though she had been weeping. He thought her even plainer than he had yesterday; but he could not deny that her expression was very sweet.

She eyed him timidly for a few minutes before she could summon up courage for her simple question.

"Do you think we shall have to wait long, Mr. Ord? I mean is the rain nearly over?"

"Over? Well, no. I am afraid there is no

chance of our leaving here for another three-quarters of an hour or so," he returned, moving his arm for a moment from the dripping window-sill.

"Three-quarters of an hour!" she exclaimed, in a tone of such genuine dismay that he smiled grimly in spite of his own discomfiture.

"I am sorry that you are so uncomfortable, Miss Maturin; but the fact is we cannot help ourselves."

"Mr. Tracy told me that he thought it would not rain, or I would never have ventured so far," she continued, as though distressed at the awkwardness of her position.

"Mr. Tracy was a bad prophet, then," he replied, coldly; and then he turned himself again, as though to study the prospect. He had nothing to say to her; between them there was a gulf which he had determined nothing should induce him to bridge over. If they were to remain there an hour, he would only address a curt observation or two. She had come between him and his lawful rights, and he was not likely to forget that for a moment; and as he remembered his wrongs, the frown gathered darkly to his brow. No wonder her heart sank within her as she watched him.

"I was right, and he hates me," she said to herself, mournfully; "and he was so gentle with me yesterday before he knew all," and then,



with the courage of sudden impulse which comes sometimes to the weakest and the most timid women, she determined that at all cost she must speak to him. She had had a final interview with Mr. Tracy that morning, and had gathered much in spite of the lawyer's guarded speech. She knew that Robert Ord had been bitterly disappointed, that there had been hard words said, and harder things thought than were ever likely to come to her knowledge. And as she looked at the hard lines of the handsome face before her, and remembered the few icy words with which he had addressed her, she felt that her task would not be a pleasant one; but none the less did she resolve that she would ask his forgiveness for being the innocent cause of his wrong. "I must meet him again and again, as I must meet all of them," she thought. "Oh! if I could only soften him, if but one of them would look kindly on me and be my friend I think I could bear it better," and then in her impulse she moved a little closer to him.

"Mr. Ord, I must speak to you," she began; but as he turned round she stopped scared by the very sternness of his face.

"I am quite at Miss Maturin's service," he returned; but not looking at her nevertheless.

"Yes, I know; but then there are some things so hard in the telling."

"Some things—— Well—yes!"

"But none so hard as this. Do you know, Mr. Ord, when you spoke to me last night I was almost dumb before you."

"I remember it well, Miss Maturin."

"You questioned me then, but I could not answer you; I felt almost desperate when I thought of all that there was to tell. Mr. Ord, shall I ever be able to tell you how grieved I am for what has happened."

Then the blackest frown that had ever been seen on Robert Ord's brow gathered there again. She had dared to speak on that subject to him—to him!

"Oh, Mr. Ord!"

"Well, what now?" he asked, haughtily.

"Because I can see it in your face, because I can feel it here," putting her hand on her heart; "because I know as well as though I had heard them, all the bitter things you have said and felt. Do you think I blame you? Not I. You have been cruelly wronged; you and all of them; but your suffering is nothing compared to mine."

She spoke passionately, but without any idea of defending herself; for the anger of his look stung her beyond endurance. Her spirit was fairly roused now.

"You know that if it had been in my power this thing should never have happened to you."

Then he remained absolutely silent.

"Mr. Ord, did you hear me?"

"I hear you well, Miss Maturin."

"Then why do you not answer me?" she persisted; but again he remained silent. How was he to bring himself to reply to her? "Oh, Mr. Ord, this is too cruel, when you know how wretched, how utterly wretched, all this terrible money has made me." And then she broke down, and for a moment wept before him as though she were heart-broken. "Do you not think that if I could undo it I would? God knows that it is not my fault that all this trouble and wrong have come upon you."

"I accuse you of nothing, Miss Maturin."

"No; but your silence does; it accuses me terribly. Do you think I was to blame in anything? that I might have sent for you before?"

"No, I do not think that."

"Then in what have I failed?" she continued, her face growing paler; for it was impossible to mistake his manner. But again he hesitated.

He was wishing himself most earnestly away by this time. No appearance of innocence on her part could alter his opinion, so he told himself; but something of the hard, bitter humour was oozing away. In reality he was gentle at heart, and he could not bear to treat her churlishly. She might be what he thought her, but he could not bring himself to tell her his sus-

pitions. Not at least unless she should drive him to it ; but his silence was betraying him.

"Miss Maturin," he said, not unkindly, " this is a very unfortunate subject you have chosen ; pray let us change it."

But she shook her head.

" Not till you have answered my question, Mr. Ord."

" I must decline to answer it, Miss Maturin."

" What ! you decline to tell me wherein I have deserved blame ; is that generous, is that fair ?"

" You forget. I accuse you of nothing. The time for all such accusation is past. Let us consider the matter at an end. I may hold my own opinion, but I do not care to allude to it again."

" Allude to what ?" she returned, looking bewildered. " What is at an end ? Do you not see how hard all this is for me ? You will not speak to me because I am the innocent cause of all this trouble."

" Pardon me, I do not regard you as the innocent cause, Miss Maturin. There, it is your own fault. I would have spared you this. You are compelling the truth from me."

" Yes, yes ; I know."

Thus driven in a corner, he continued, steadily——

" I cannot regard you as innocent. In my own mind I think there must have been undue

influence at work, or my aunt would never have left you all her money. Ah, you shrink from me. Why did you make me tell you this?"

"You believe this—you believe this of me, Mr. Ord?"

"I have thought so, and I think so still; but I am grieved that you oblige me to speak so plainly. I do not wish to be churlish to a lady. I think that you were young and friendless and needed help, and the position was one of great temptation. We were strangers to you, and under a cloud; you were hardly aware of the moral wrong you were doing; you might only have coveted a small portion of my aunt's wealth. I can quite believe you are sorry now for what has happened, but how can such sorrow avail us?"

"You believe this of me?" she repeated, in the same tone, but he never forgot the look with which she said it; it haunted him long afterwards—there was no anger, but the incredulous sorrow in her eyes moved even him to compassion.

"Miss Maturin, do let us say no more."

"There is nothing more to be said," she answered, wearily, and her hands dropped to her side as she spoke. "I must bear it, I suppose. I cannot defend myself, for you would not believe my word; you have not believed all that Mr. Tracy has told you, of how I have worked and

watched for you." Nothing could exceed the hopelessness with which she said this.

"I am sorry all this has occurred, Miss Maturin."

Then for a moment the colour came into her pale face.

"Are you sorry, Mr. Ord? Well, that is something. No, I will not let this imputation crush me; I will not, I will not. I don't think you quite know what you have done, being a stranger, but I forgive you; you have almost broken my heart, but you have given me an object in life."

"How so, Miss Maturin?"

"Ah! you do not know me; I am a poor creature, but I can be very patient. I will not call Heaven to witness my innocence, for you would not believe my words; but I will never rest, I will never cease from striving day after day, and year after year, till I remove this suspicion. Mr. Ord, it will be my one, my only thought."

"Miss Maturin heaps coals of fire on my head," he returned, but the sarcasm somehow failed him.

Once more she looked at him with that mild reproach in her eyes.

"Yes, the time will come when you will own that you have wronged me; it may be years

hence, but I know it will come, when you will surely own it."

"Be assured that I shall not delay coming to you if any such taking back of words be necessary."

"No, I know you will not; I can see that you are true, though you are so terribly hard;" and then she moved away from him, and he saw a look in her face as though she was heart-broken.

"I hope I am having a very pleasant day, on the whole," thought Robert Ord, bitterly, as he walked up and down among the brick-heaps: he had done his work—she had forced him to do it; but the result did not satisfy him. What good was it to him that he had convicted her of her sin if she would not own that she had so sinned? He had grappled with her, and she had glided from him with a look of reproach which haunted him against his will; do what he would, he could not banish a certain feeling of remorse as he thought of it. He had accused her of virtual dishonesty, or at least of obtaining an undue influence over his aunt, and she had not defended herself by so much as one word. Surely he had been gentle enough with her. He had been betrayed into anger once or twice, and had then repented and refrained himself. With all his wrath he had not said anything specially bitter, though the sternness of his look or tone

might have rebuked her. But of what avail was all this mildness and refraining, since she would insist on assuming the airs of heartbroken innocence? It made him feel as though his magnanimity had been thrown away; and yet a few hours ago he had sworn that on no account could he bring himself to forgive her.

These were not pleasant thoughts, as he stumbled over the brick-heaps, among the mouldering passages. How he loathed the whole place with an impatient loathing that recurred to him in future days! He could always recall that scene, it was so vivid in his memory—that desolate dwelling, with the strips of plaster clinging to the damp, mouldering walls; through the gaping window-frame, the broad, green level, and grey ruins misty with driving rain; the dull thud of horned heads striking impatiently against the doorway; and always motionless, always the central figure in that picture, the tall figure in the clinging black draperies: he could see the curve of the long neck, the small head bent slightly forward, the fluttering of the thin hands; could almost hear the monotonous tones of the low murmuring voice, “Yes, the time will come, when you will own that you have wronged me.” When and how did that time come to Robert Ord?

The rain was ceasing now; he had just become aware of the fact, and wondering how he was to




break the silence and open his lips to speak to her, when she relieved him of his embarrassment.

"The rain is over now, I believe," she said, turning round to him. There was not a speck of colour in her face, but her calmness was wonderful: all the tremor, the nervous agitation that had so disturbed him yesterday had left her; she looked like one who had unexpectedly received a deadly blow, but who was rallying from it. Her perfect self-possession astonished him.

"The storm has not turned its back upon us yet," he returned, trying to speak with equal *sangfroid*; "but if you are willing we will take advantage of this lull;" to which she briefly assented, and in another minute they were walking side by side along the high road and under the dripping trees, greatly to his surprise, for he had expected her to decline his escort; but he did not know Rotha Maturin.

There was another awkward silence, which neither attempted to break, and then he took courage and relieved himself of a perplexity.

"Miss Maturin, after what has passed there can hardly be very cordial feelings between us, as it is impossible for me to consider myself otherwise than injured; but still, as I said before, you may not have anticipated all these consequences. I do not wish to judge you harshly."



A dim smile flitted across her face, more mournful than any tears.

"Do you mean there can be peace between us? I certainly do not wish it otherwise, Mr. Ord."

"Neither do I," he returned, hastily. "What is done, is done. I have no wish to make your position wholly unbearable. I suppose we can always exchange the civilities of strangers?"

"I have no intention whatever of avoiding you, Mr. Ord."

"You could not if you wished," he returned, piqued by her perfect indifference. "Bryn and Kirkby Vicarage are too close together."

"Yes, I know," she answered, with a shiver. "Do you think I forget what lies before me? If you will let me come amongst you, I will come; if not, I will bide my time. I do not mean to shun any of you. Why should I? I have done nothing of which to be ashamed—all such shunning will be on your side."

"I cannot answer for it that we shall be very cordial, Miss Maturin."

"Of course not. Do you think I expect it? Of course you will make my life bitter amongst you. But then I do not mean to blame you. You are very unjust. You do not know how to be merciful. But I can wait my time." And after that he had nothing to say.

It was a strange, dreary walk, and one which

they were not likely to forget. It was a relief when they had left the river behind them, and were treading the well-worn pavement of the High Street; and still more a relief when they had reached the portico of the King's Arms.

And then they parted.

"I suppose I may not offer you my hand, Miss Maturin?" he said, with some slight feeling of compunction, as she turned her white, wistful face to him.

"No, Mr. Ord, you may not; you must never offer it to me again till you have taken back all you have said—till you have cleared me from this terrible imputation." And then when she had said this, she left him and went in.

## CHAPTER IV.

MEG.

"Oh, what makes woman lovely? Virtue, faith,  
 And gentleness in suffering. An endurance  
 Through scorn or trial: these call beauty forth,  
 Give it the stamp celestial, and admit it  
 To sisterhood with angels!"


BRENT.

IN a well-known suburb of London—a suburb so widely known that its very name will bring a flood of reminiscences to many of us—there is a retired and pleasant thoroughfare called Chatham Place.

The glory of Hackney is departed. The traces of past grandeur are fast fading away from its sunny old streets. The monster tide of fashion that has set in during late years has swept family after family westward. The wealthy citizens who lived in these great brick mansions, dwelling not figuratively but in reality under their fig-trees, pleasant old places set in the midst of shady gardens, have long ago migrated, each man according to his several degrees of consequence and ambition—some to the sun-baked pavements of West-End squares and streets; a few to the humbler precincts of Russell Square;

while others, less ambitious, and pining for green fields and country lanes, have sought out dwelling places for themselves at Hampstead or Highgate, never dreaming that those fields would soon lay low, and those leafy lanes be trodden under foot, under the ever-advancing needs of increasing population. Ah me! those brick-and-mortar paradises; those long winding streets, modernized and uninteresting, where not so many years ago the children loitered in the narrow lanes to gather hawthorn and sweetbriar roses, or dabbled knee-deep in fields of golden buttercups; where the blackbirds and the thrushes used to sing in the early mornings, and in summer the air was full of the sweetness of new-mown hay. Now one walks as a stranger through the old spots, remembering as in a dream some favourite clump of trees, or well-worn stile, where a glittering gin-palace now flanks the path, or a labyrinth of intersecting roads branch into endless lines and divisions of undeviating and hopeless uniformity.

But though such glory as it once possessed is departed from Hackney, there is still a pleasant air of repose and quiet about its old familiar streets. Here and there some of the old families still linger, clinging fondly to bygone associations, and despising the tyrannies of fashion. The whole place is a little oppressive and heavy in its respectability. There is mono-



tony in its aspect—one day resembles another—but one feels a dim sort of tenderness for it nevertheless: one is haunted by a desire to linger long in the shady churchyard, where the old church tower and the church are so strangely dissevered, and where one walks down the flagged path under the trees, with the dead lying on either hand, and the children are plucking daisies out of the rank grass, or playing on the grey, discoloured gravestones.

Branching off from the churchyard, and passing under the railway bridge, one finds oneself in Chatham Place. Here quiet would become dreariness, save for the hum of voices proceeding at set hours from the great school-house. It is impossible to connect life and activity with Chatham Place. The houses are dull and obscure, standing back in long narrow gardens, with great gates that swing solemnly backward and forward. The windows are long and narrow, and scarcely require the adjuncts of wire blinds. But they look pleasantly on a long strip of triangular green, where a few sheep and cows are always browsing, and beyond which lies Homerton Terrace. There are few trees, but plenty of dust and sunshine. There is no deafening traffic to jar one's nerves. All the knockers are bright as gold, and the one stone step conspicuous for its whiteness. Few footsteps crunch in the long gravel path. Here

again respectability and monotony go hand in hand.

In one of these houses, many years before the events we have recorded took place, lived Mrs. Carruthers, Rotha Maturin's friend—or Meg Browning, as she was then.

Meg, as she was always called—for never in all her days had any one been known to call her by her baptismal name of Margaret—Meg lived with her father and mother in one of these shady old houses in Chatham Place.

Meg's father was a clerk in some mercantile house—a hardworking, industrious man, going forth to his business in the early morning and never returning till late at night. And her mother had failing sight and delicate health. Never was any youth less gay and exciting than Meg's, but never was any richer in dutiful unselfish happiness.

Meg helped her father. She treasured and made much of her one talent—rising early and taking rest late, that she might bring it to fruition. By-and-by came the reward to her industry, when she gave music lessons in the same school where she had learnt as a girl. But Meg did more than this: besides her daily drudgery at Miss Binks's, and her trudgings backwards and forwards across the churchyard, she had her household duties to transact. She had her simple cookeries, and fine ironings, and plaitings

of her mother's caps, and hemming of her mother's snowy handkerchiefs. She had shirt-fronts to stitch, and to unpick and rectify her mother's knitting, always ragged with dropped stitches. She had to read the paper, or make conversation when her father came home tired at night; sometimes to play cribbage with one or the other, or to take a hand at whist when her father chose to play dummy.

Then on Sunday morning she must go across the churchyard hanging on her father's arm. She must sit with him under the sunny west window in the old pew, and look out his places in the Psalm book—they sung Tait and Brady then. She must remember all the heads of the sermon for her mother's benefit, and retail them in the hot drowsy afternoon, when her father was having his after-dinner nap. And in the evening she must read long pages to them both out of Blair's Sermons and Harvey's Meditations, with sometimes a spell out of Doddridge's "Rise and Progress." In the twilight she would play to them the old-fashioned tunes they loved—Luther's grand old hymn, "How cheerful along the gay mead," with a spice of the Old Hundredth; while the parents would sit hand in hand, listening with tears in their eyes: the father joining in now and then with odd trills and roulades of the old style.

Then for pleasures; did they not go once or




twice in the summer to the grand London parks, and listen to the band in Kensington Gardens, and feed the ducks in St. James's, or go over to Battersea, or take the steamer to Greenwich? And in the winter did not Meg's father take her twice to hear Shakspeare's plays—*Hamlet* and *Henry V.*, regaling her all the way there and back with glorious tales of Mrs. Siddons and the Kembles?—dissipations which made her lie a whole half-hour longer in bed the next morning.

Meg had no young friends, but she never missed them; she had an odd sturdy character of her own—individuality that would have marked her in a crowd. She had very little in common with girls of her own age. She worked while they played; she was old-fashioned, reserved, a trifle repellent—and then she was no beauty.

To tell the truth, one could not conceive a woman more unattractive. She had just the sort of face and figure about which there could be no doubt. Positive ugliness is difficult to redeem. Meg's defects were lamentable. A husband would be the last thing one could prophesy for her. And, to tell the truth, Meg was so sensible as to know her shortcomings. In her own person she never dreamt of love.

Meg had a tall bony figure; she had broad, high shoulders, and angularities innumerable, added to which she was short-sighted and stooped; she had a strong Scotch face, hard-featured, and



freckled, with high cheek-bones, with large light eyes rather grave than mirthful, and flaxen hair without glint or gloss, which she combed up regardless of ornament into a knot behind.


Meg knew her plainness, and wore sad-coloured gowns, like a Quakeress. Her mother bought her sometimes knots of ribbons and pinned them on with her own hands : but they hardly looked brave against her complexion. Meg's colours were all muddled and ran into each other, faint thick reds and browns, with a sallow forehead ; and, worst of all, in speech her voice was rather too deep and unmusical, somewhat masculine in fact.

Meg's one beauty was her passionate love of music. Those strong large hands of hers could draw sweetest tones from the cracked old piano, purchased second-hand on Meg's one-and-twentieth birthday, to replace a spinnet nearly dumb with age. As she played, a grave, solemn light would shine in her eyes, her voice would give out rich, deep notes ; there was something grand about Meg then. " Oh, Day of Wrath ! oh, Day of Mourning ! " Meg would sing the " Dies Iræ " in a way that would have thrilled you to hear her.

When Meg was almost seven-and-twenty her father died. He had worked as man and boy for more than fifty years, and had laid by a few thrifty savings for his widow ; besides which, a maternal aunt had left a few hundreds to Meg.

With a little prudence they might still continue to live in the old way; nay, more, Meg was able to relinquish a few of her labours, and to minister more fully to her mother's needs, who had become totally blind. Meg played oftener now for her own pleasure, and picked up stitches with a vigorous hand, as she listened patiently to the long list of ailments which constituted her mother's chief topic of conversation, interlarded with stories of her dearly remembered youth.

Meg used to look up and nod by way of parenthesis. She was never a great talker, even in her most confidential moments; but her face would be a marvel of content. She would glance out at the long narrow garden with its cabbages and sunflowers, where some fine linen would always be bleaching on the lawn, and then back at the horsehair chair, at her mother's placid wrinkled face, with its grey hair and snowy, closely crimped cap, at the drab silk shawl and net kerchief, and great strip of yellowish soiled knitting, and the pins which moved so feebly in and out. "Another stitch dropped, mother; it will be Jacob's ladder soon," she would say, with a little laugh: and she would run off row after row with her nimble fingers, humming a low soft tune as she did so. She thought her mother's conversation the most delightful in the world; the old lady's prose never seemed to weary her. She would listen to a story she had heard a dozen



times over, with never-varying interest ; her nods would be brisk and regular, and she would even look disappointed when a brief nap interrupted the narrative in the most graphic part.

Perhaps there is a serpent in every paradise ; even the humble household in Chatham Place was not to be exempt from its tempter in human shape.

Meg was nine-and-twenty when she met Jack Carruthers for the first time—handsome Jack Carruthers, as his fellow-clerks called him. It was at a birthday tea-drinking at one of her pupil's houses, and Meg was to go and play for them while they danced—at least, that is how she interpreted the invitation. You may be sure Jack thought little about the tall angular woman in black, who played polkas and schottisches, bringing rare music out of rather a wooden instrument. When she was not wanted, Meg hunched her shoulders and peered curiously over some engravings at a side table. No one noticed or spoke to her. Jack quizzed her a little as he flirted with handsome Susan Smithers. After supper, when she sang some Scotch songs to them in that deep rich voice of hers, he condescended to ask who that woman was ; and was told in sneering whispers by a friend of his that she was “the daughter of old Dick Browning. One of our fellows, Jack, and a precious old skinflint—so I’ve heard. Worked hard all his life. Plenty of

money. Must have saved no end of tin. Made his daughter drudge, though, as a music teacher. Plays well, doesn't she? Not much of a beauty to look at, though. Daughter has some cool hundreds of her own, I'm told. Lives with an old blind mother in Chatham Place. Eh? what? want an introduction? That's right, my boy; wide awake as usual. Think I'll try and cut you out myself; only it would not be friendly. Mind you pay me the money you owe me on your wedding-day;" and so on, with many claps on the shoulders.

Jack makes a grimace and haw-haws a little, but finally walks up as bold as brass and begs to thank Miss Browning for her charming music, Jack adores music, and so on. Meg reddens rather; perhaps she is not accustomed to be addressed. She drops her eye-glasses nervously. She says very little, but stammers a great deal. She looks up at him shyly once or twice, and thinks she has never seen so personable a man. Jack is very handsome, certainly; he has a fine brown complexion and bold black eyes, and his whiskers curl most delightfully: perhaps his lips are thick, and his face rather coarse, but to Meg he seemed a stalwart Adonis. Something in her frame seemed to beat most strangely, as he stood by her chair, pulling his whiskers and speaking quick, determined sentences, he made her sing some more Scotch songs, and chanted a sonorous bass by way

of chorus. And when she rose to go, his friend and he walked with her all the way home to Chatham Place, Jack carrying her music-roll.

Where there is a will there is a way. How it fell out I know not ; but before many weeks had elapsed Jack Carruthers had made good his footing in the little house at Chatham Place, and was well received by both mother and daughter. At first he brought his friend, but afterwards he came alone. By-and-by, Meg would stand regularly at the window of an evening, watching until she saw him striding from under the dark railway bridge. When he reached the row of posts she would turn from the window with a blush on her sallow face, and pick up her mother's stitches nervously, with her heart beating so loudly that she could hardly breathe.

Jack would bring her new music and flowers—little bunches of narcissus and jonquils, or fragrant clove-pinks, which he would buy in the City for a few pence. Sometimes, as he sat on the top of the omnibus, he would employ himself in picking off the dead leaves. Meg thought them the most beautiful bouquets in the world, and would redden more than ever as she put them in water. She would sit quite silent in her great happiness, while Jack played with her ball of darning cotton and discoursed on politics in his bluff, quick way. By-and-by, he would ask

her to play or sing, and then nothing could exceed her bliss.

They say love can beautify even a plain woman. Meg became almost brave in her attire ; her hands got white and soft by magic, and her hair grew smooth and almost glossy ; she still wore her sad-coloured gowns, but she brightened them up with knots of pink ribbons—a faint drowsy pink being the only colour that blended with her faded tints—and girded herself with wonderful aprons worked in floss silks. Jack used to note these changes with a satirical eye, as he stood in the dark corner by the piano. He was sure of the cool hundreds now. Sometimes he would sigh or swear softly to himself as he walked home across the churchyard, and through Clapton Square, and past the five houses, and so on, on his way to Stamford Hill, where he lived, “ things must be at a pretty pass indeed with Jack Carruthers when he took it into his head to marry Meg Browning.”

Things were at a pretty pass indeed !

I do not know in what language Jack couched that villanous proposal of his. He was a tolerably hardened reprobate—most likely he did it coolly enough. Meg's head drooped over her hands, and great tears splashed on the keys—Jack could almost hear them ; the deep passionate nature which lay beneath all her reserve and shyness, awoke to life at his first words with a suddenness

that frightened herself. Oh, the power of love in such women—the pure, unselfish worship, the profound adoration, the blindness, the credulity! Meg, raining tears of great unalloyed happiness, placed her hand in Jack's, and felt as though Heaven had no more to offer her.

Jack was an ardent wooer: he was all impatience—perhaps his creditors were pressing. Meg was nearly thirty now; even her mother agreed that there was no reason for them to wait.

The little household in Chatham Place was to go on much as usual. Jack was to be received there as an inmate—Meg could not leave her mother. Jack entreated her, almost with tears in his eyes, not to go to any needless expense on his account: Meg was for refurnishing; the shabby horsehair chairs and sofa were insupportable to her now. With tender reluctance she renounced her ambitious projects, and contented herself with a little painting and papering and a gay-coloured chintz.

Poor Meg! she wove one blissful dream after another as she sewed at those chair-covers, the great sprawling lilies and roses were not brighter or more preposterous than some of those dreams.

The wedding was a very humble one. Meg had few friends, and Jack had potent reasons why he would ask none of his; so one sunny May morning Meg, dressed in her new lavender-




silk, took Jack's arm and walked with him under the dark railway arch, and between the long rows of grassy hillocks where the children looked up from their daisy wreaths, to the old parish church, and there signed her name for the first time as Meg Carruthers.

I do not know for how many days Meg's passionate happiness was to last, but before many weeks were over she was a broken-hearted woman.

Meg knew she was the dupe of a heartless profligate, she knew that he had married her to save himself from a debtor's prison, that he loathed his bondage and could not conceal his scorn of the woman who had linked her fate with his; but she had more than this to bear. Jack, gross in his vices, came home night after night to the affrighted women with curses on his lips and speaking in the thick voice of the drunkard, terrifying those pure souls immeasurably, and filling Meg's cup of woe to the brim.

Ah me ! what she suffered ! Scorned, despised, and often hardly used, she yet claved as only a woman can to the reprobate she called husband : when he cursed she held her peace ; in his rare moments of sullen, half-contemptuous amity, she played and sang to him, striving to win him a little from his indifference ; many a rude blow she averted by hiding her head in his breast, or if he flung her from thence she would crush



down the sobs that almost strangled her, and look up in his face and try to smile with the black bruise from his grip still smarting on her poor arm.

She denied him nothing : every penny of her little hoard was wrung from her, and when all was gone, she made no complaint, but took up her old drudgery again, and went out in the sleet and snow morning after morning, that her mother might want for nothing.

Oh, what he made her endure for her mother's sake ! Meg's filial love was a passion. Day after day she saw the tears roll down the wrinkled cheeks from those sightless eyes, as she left her beside her lonely hearth. No more picking up of stitches and sweet endless gossips in the sunshine. One by one Meg saw her mother's little comforts disappear, saw how gradually but surely the miseries of their daily life preyed on her tender heart.

" Meg, I shall never hold your baby in my arms," she would say, as her daughter led her upstairs of a night and undressed her like a child, " but I pray God that it may be a girl." And Meg felt that her words would come true, for two days after she closed those blind eyes, and kissed them in the coffin, she laid down on her bed of pain, and knew that the baby that never nestled in her breast was dead also.


There is not much to tell after this. Meg was

never a demonstrative woman in her happiness, and she was not confidential in her misery. Perhaps I should be right in saying that she was a strong-minded woman—anyhow, she bore her troubles in a strong-minded way, making small ado and shedding few tears; she never reproached her husband for her mother's and baby's death, though in an indirect way he was the cause of both; there was nothing melodramatic about Meg; in their most terrible scenes, the woman kept silence.

Jack got everything he could; then he went into debt, the furniture was seized—not a stick or straw was left in the old house in Chatham Place. Meg, tearless still, locked the door with her own hands and asked her husband whither they should go.

I forbear to repeat his answer, but Meg knew then that her husband had resolved to rid himself of a hated incumbrance. A year and a half, only eighteen months ago, she had passed under that dark archway, a bride leaning on her lover's arm; now she stood looking again towards the archway, knowing that she was worse than widowed.

"I have never reproached you, Jack, and I never will; but I did not think you would leave me," was her sole answer, as she looked at the bloated handsome face, still so cruelly handsome to her; perhaps, reprobate as he was, that



tender forgiveness abashed him, for he hung his head.

"I don't think we were made to pull together, Madge," he said, rather huskily. "It is not your fault—you are a good woman, I know, and I have been your curse ; but, anyhow, you wont see the face of Jack Carruthers again."

And Meg believed him.

She went to her desolate lodgings that night, just in sight of the old house ; she could not wear mourning, but no widow ever lamented as she did over the grave of her lost love. There was something grand in her exceeding silence ; from morning to night she worked uncomplainingly at her old drudgery ; sitting by her lonely fire through the long evening, with only grievous thoughts for company, and every night and morning she prayed for Jack, as only the loving and heavy-laden can pray.

How many such prayers shall be written in letters of gold by the Recording Angel ! How many and how great the sum of them !

## CHAPTER V.

"I SHALL NEVER BE HAPPY AGAIN, MEG."

"A little by his act perhaps, yet more  
By something in me, surely not my will,  
I did not die. But slowly, as one in swoon,  
To whom life creeps back in the form of death,  
With a sense of separation, a blind pain  
Of blank obstruction, and a roar i' the ears  
Of visionary chariots which retreat  
As earth grows clearer . . . slowly, by degrees,  
I woke, rose up . . . Where was I?—in the world;  
For uses therefore I must count worth while."

AURORA LEIGH.


It was a drowsy, hot afternoon, and the small patch of green which was generally an object of rejoicing to the inhabitants of Chatham Place, an oasis in their desert, was all burnt and barren, offering but poor pasturage to a few forlorn-looking sheep that had long ago discontinued cropping the dry herbage, and were now herded together for shade; sunshine and dust were the order of the day, the pavements were bleached and glaring, the trees distilled grey dust on the passenger's head, the roads were ruled into tiny furrows of the same, the paint on the doors was blistered and peeled in long brown flakes, and the bright knockers were like molten lead; the very windows gaped wide open, as though striv-

ing for more air ; wire-blinds were withdrawn ; there was a flutter of white curtains ; sometimes through the half-open doors one caught a glimpse of green leaves ; here and there a canary piped loudly in its gilded cage ; some brown sparrows twittered on the hot ledges ; the children had be-taken themselves to the shelter of the railway arches and were hooting amongst them like so many owls ; the chiming of many voices from the National School rose and fell in one drowsy hum : there was pent-up animal life there—a discontented hive of busy workers longing for the sunshine, sturdy urchins yearning to join their vagrant companions among the dark railway arches, restless fingers counting marbles to the tune of the multiplication-table ; outside, a sky intensely blue, plenty of yellow sunshine, but the glare and glitter almost oppressive.

Meg, sitting in her little back parlour, all shade and coolness, could hear the droning ; the mixed, indistinguishable hum in the clear summer air soothed and lulled her ; those crescendoes and falls of shrill young voices softened by distance had a music of their own. Meg used to listen to it as she plodded through her darning. She could picture the great bare rooms with the rows of rosy faces and sunburnt white heads ; she used to nod and smile at the little ones as they came trooping past her windows ; some of them would drop a shy curtsy. The solitary

woman, in spite of her grimness, had ways with her that could touch children. In the churchyard she would stop and speak to them; once she found a boy who had strayed all the way from Bethnal Green with a baby sister. Meg found them both asleep on her mother's grave, with a tattered handkerchief full of chickweed and dandelion beside them. Meg took them all the way home, carrying them in her arms by turn; the youngest child cried at parting with her.

Those summer days were very lonely with Meg; it was holiday time now at Miss Binks's, and the large preparatory school where she gave lessons; her two or three private pupils had betaken themselves to the sea-side, and Meg patched and mended, turned her old gowns, and thought weary thoughts through the long hot hours; in the evening she took slow aimless walks over the Downs—there were Downs then—coming back jaded and unrefreshed in the twilight to her patching again. She had no piano now, and the few books her pupils lent her were now exhausted; her only pleasure was to water her geraniums and feed her linnet. When this was over, she knew that nothing more would occur to break the monotony of these endless days. No wonder that before a week was over she would have given anything to resume her old drudgery: the hot walks through the churchyard, the long hours in a close schoolroom, the



din, the ceaseless headache, the thankless labour, all appeared enviable by the side of this enforced idleness. Sometimes she felt as though she must give it all up, as though she could not bear the solitude a day longer; she must go into the world, learn nursing, visit the hospitals, do anything or everything, so that she might be brought face to face with her kind, and be of use to some one; she was wearing her heart out only just to gain her daily bread, and what would that avail her, seeing that her bread was only bitter to her?

To be of use, to be necessary to some one, not to be loved, that was all her thought now. Meg had awakened from that pitiful dream of hers, self-degraded, perhaps a little hardened, but with a fearful thirst and misery of love aroused within her that nothing could allay; like many another fond worshipper, she had fallen down before a stock and a stone; nay, worse, she had suffered such usage that any other woman would have found it hard to forgive; she knew there were bruises that she would carry about with her to her dying day, and yet she had only clung to the hand that inflicted them. If he had come back to her would she not forgive him?—ay, unto seventy times seven. But he would never come back.

Poor Meg! she was resolving all sorts of weary fancies in her mind on this afternoon:



while she was piecing the old faded mantle that must last her through the summer, she was chiding herself for her cowardice. Why are some women so slow to plan or rather carry out any self-conceived line of action for themselves? had her secluded life checked all spirit of enterprise? why should she be so afraid to risk her little all and venture on an untrodden path? What if she should fail?—she was the only sufferer. Her solitude, the harass of these cruel and incessant memories, were killing her by inches; she was a woman of iron nerve, but this was beyond even her endurance, and yet she shrank from taking the first step into the new life.

If only some one would help her! And then the pieces of silk fell apart in her hands, as a low tap at her door startled her from her reverie. Visitors were so rare with Mrs. Carruthers that she scarcely raised her head as she uttered the mechanical "Come in." It was only her landlady or the maid with her tea equipage, she thought; it was therefore no slight surprise to her when the door was pushed briskly open, and a tall, slight girl in mourning came forward with outstretched hands.

"Meg, my dear old Meg!"

"Rotha! Good Heavens! Rotha Maturin!" And then they embraced each other after the fashion of women. Rotha, with a little flurry of

demonstration that seemed habitual to her, clinging to her friend with quick earnest kisses in an almost childish way.

"Are you glad to see me, Meg?"

"Not more glad than surprised." But Meg, in spite of her characteristic abruptness, looked more than her words. There was a pleasant light of welcome in her eyes, as she cleared the litter of work from the one arm-chair, and brought out the little round footstool. She did not sit down and talk to her, as most women would, but after her first greeting moved quietly about the room, letting down the blind and arranging the table, bestirring herself for her comfort in her quick short-sighted way; the hard muscles of her face relaxing visibly as she untied Rotha's bonnet and shook out the dust from her mantle. Those large strong hands were very gentle in their touch, as Rotha well knew; they had an odd knack with them that made you comfortable in spite of yourself. Rotha knew Mrs. Carruthers's ways by this time; she was well aware that she must bide her time for talking. Her dusty walk had wearied her, she looked even paler than when we saw her last. The room was deliciously cool and shady. She lay back contentedly in her arm-chair, while Meg squared her high shoulders and peered into corners. It was five o'clock. The little tea-table must be spread and garnished. There were

mysterious whispers ; the red-armed maid-of-all-work appeared and disappeared continually. All at once there was a delicious fragrance of mignonette and hot bread together ; tiny curls of blue smoke wreathed the little black teapot. Meg would not talk to her visitor, but she was compounding a cup of tea for her, such as her soul loved, and Rotha, who knew her quaint ways, and was wearied past weariness, sat meekly sipping it, taking in everything with quick womanly instinct ; the dull room, Meg's worn face and shabby dress ; the wedding-ring hanging so loosely on the thin wasted finger—everything down to the faded patches that were being turned and pieced. That quiet observation was telling her more than hours of talk. "She's dying of *ennui* and dulness, and feeding on her own thoughts," said Rotha to herself. "Why should we not be the happier for each other's company ? Things will not be quite so hopeless if I can infuse a little sunshine into her life ;" and then she leant forward with a little colour and eagerness.

"Ah, there is the netting. I suppose I may talk now : " for Mrs. Carruthers had brought forth a long strip of netting, yellow with age, and was weaving her shuttle to and fro as though her life depended on it. Meg nodded as she pulled and knitted vigorously, but made no other answer.

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"I am glad I may talk now," she repeated ;  
"I have been watching you for such a long time.  
Do you know your face has been telling me  
tales?"

Mrs. Carruthers shook her head.

"Oh, but it has ; you are so changed, my  
poor Meg. You look so thin and worn ; and  
there are positively grey streaks in your hair.  
You were not grey when I saw you last, dear  
Meg."

Again that mournful shake of the head.

"And then you are so silent ; you will not  
talk to me now. I am treading on forbidden  
ground, I suppose. Do you think that I do not  
know what your life has been?"

"Oh, Rotha ; hush !" and Meg's voice was  
almost grating in its harshness.

"No, I shall not 'hush !'—you are always  
trying to silence me. You would not write to me,  
and now you will not speak. I know he has left  
you, that you are deserted and broken-hearted ;  
but I never knew how broken-hearted till I saw  
your face, Meg."

"Rotha, if you have any pity for me——"

"Pity ! I wonder if any one ever felt such  
pity as I have ? When I heard your child was  
dead I thought and almost hoped that you  
might die too. I so trusted and prayed that your  
baby might comfort you."

A quick catch of the breath, a quivering of

those harsh muscles, and Meg covered her face with her hands.

"If you only knew how I longed to come to you! You have been so good to me. Do you think I shall ever forget those old days? No one ever understood and loved you as I did. Try and speak to me, dear."

Meg raised her head from her hands. She so rarely wept that her face was quite burnt and blistered with her tears. Nothing but the mention of her child ever caused them to flow: ill-usage she could bear, contempt, drudging labour; but the thought of the little confined body—flesh of her flesh—which her eyes had never looked upon and her arms had never cradled, touched the spring of her womanhood.

"Rotha, I cannot bear it; you must not speak to me of my child."

"Why not, dear Meg?"

"Why not? Do you not know they took him away and buried him? They never brought him to me and laid him in my arms; no, not for one moment; though he was beautiful as the day—that was his father's doing."

"He did it for the best."

"Perhaps so. They tell me that I was delirious. My mother had only been dead a few days then. It was all trouble and misery together. But I did so pray that my child might win me his love, Rotha."

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"It was not worth the winning, my poor Meg."

"Not to others, perhaps ; but to me it was everything. You should not have said that, Rotha. Though he were black beyond all blackness, he is my husband."

"There, I have made you angry?"

"I should think any wife might be angry at such a speech ; but you are only a child, Rotha. I don't expect Jack will ever come back to me. Why should he, unless he be in trouble? But somehow I feel I shall see him again."

"I trust not, for your own sake. No, you must not be vexed with me—it is the honest truth. only I did not mean it to escape me."

"Ah, there again ; you have never loved, or you would not say such things. Child, I cannot die till I have seen him again."

"Meg!"

"How frightened you look ! I am not mad ; indeed, I am speaking in sober earnestness. But now you know why it is best for me to keep silence. The heart knoweth its own bitterness, Rotha."

"Its own bitterness? Well, yes."

"You know me best, but you cannot understand my feeling. You think Meg Carruthers daft for hinting at such things. When you have lived a little longer you will know that still waters run deepest."

"I always knew you were very deep and still, Meg; but—but——"

"But you did not expect that I could love quite so fervently—that is what you were going to say. Well, I am not offended. What has a grim woman such as I am to do with such things? Why did I ever love? But he made me. Oh, Jack! Jack!" And Meg rocked herself to and fro in infinite distress.

"Ah, I must hush you now."

"Yes, you must hush me; I deserve it. I am forgetting myself. But it is all your fault. Why did you come and speak to me of my trouble? You harass and excite me; you know I never talk of such things. You have stirred me up dangerously to-night, Rotha."

"If I have, I must calm you. Don't shake your head, Meg, and think it beyond my power. I shall throw no oil on the troubled waters; instead of that there must be a mingling of salt tears—a general brackishness. Since I have seen you I have been in the deep waters myself."

"Do you mean you have been in trouble?"

"Trouble? Well, yes, I suppose so. I have sounded and found it forty fathoms; there is no anchoring anywhere."

Meg gave a faint smile.

"There, I knew I could quiet you. You

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always had a fancy for my quaint similes. How many years is it since we last met?"

"Three, is it not?"

"Three, or thirty—I forget which. I don't like mentioning my troubles in the same breath with yours—it seems too much like weighing iron and feathers together; but I don't think I would willingly live those years over again."

"Probably not."

"No, indeed; there were days and months when I thought of Miss Binks's as though it were paradise itself. You used to pity me and tell me that I was always tired. Oh, Meg, how I used to long even for the headaches and cramped fingers again."

"Poor child! you look utterly worn out now."

"Worn? I should think so; they have crushed all my youth out of me between them; and yet it will not quite die, poor thing. Sometimes I feel so old. There, take up your netting again; I have a long story to tell you, and I mean to tell it in my old place." And Rotha brought her footstool and laid her head against Meg's shabby gown.

How she talked; how she poured it all out as one woman will to another: with what utter abandon, relief, and passion of words: no stammering, no painful suppression of pent-up pain, no fear of being misunderstood here. She made Meg see it all as though she had been



present. That interview in the Castle garden, with the sunset and the apple-trees and the ruins, the almost guilty terror with which she met Robert Ord, and the miserable cowardice that kept her tongue-tied in his presence; and the poor room in Eglistone Abbey; how graphically she told it all! No wonder Meg's netting fell from her hands, and that she scarcely stirred or breathed in her profound interest.

"My poor child!" That was all she said when Rotha had finished, but the tones conveyed a world of pity, and once again, very tenderly, "My poor child!"

"You may very well call me that, Meg." And then there was a long silence between them; only Meg gently stroked the hand that lay so listlessly on her lap. It was not a pretty hand, not specially small or well shaped, but very thin and white, and as Meg touched it, it felt to her in its soft helplessness like the hand of a sick child.

"I shall never be happy again, Meg."


"No, you must not say that."

"Why must I not say it? I could have borne anything but that; but his accusation has crushed all the spirit out of me."

"It was very hard, certainly."

"Was it not terribly hard, and so cruel! But I must not think of that now."

"I must say that I think you acted very nobly."



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"Oh, Meg!"

"Yes, nobly; I always thought that you were so proud, Rotha, and yet you could bear yourself as though you were not angry with the man."

"No more I was—I quite wonder at myself now for my want of anger; but then his wrongs were so great, he looked so wan and sad with all his harshness, that though I was utterly wretched, I could not find it in my heart to speak bitterly."

"Of course I think that you were right, but yet——"

"Well, Meg?"

"I hardly like to finish my sentence; it sounds unsympathetic after what you have told me; but it does strike me that you are just a little morbid about it all."

"Now you are going to be unkind."

"No, you must not say that—you must not think for a moment that I do not pity you. I am sure it is all miserably hard. Your position for the present must be cruel. But, Rotha, don't make it quite unbearable by taking too morbid a view of it—that was always your danger."

"But not in this instance," she interposed, eagerly.

"Yes, in this instance. Surely it is no fault of yours that the man cannot get his rights."

"No, certainly not."

"Neither are you to blame for being the

innocent cause of his suspicion. It is true he has it in his power to injure you and make you miserable, and yet it seems to me as though you could avoid such misery."

"How so?"

"By accepting it as your cross. You have already by your Christian forgiveness robbed your pain of its chief sting. I would have you bear yourself now as though you were indeed guiltless."

"And do I not so bear myself?" she returned, somewhat proudly.

"No, you are failing utterly. You are letting the pain and misery of it all wear you to the heart; there is a look on your face, Rotha, that I cannot bear to see—there is such patience and such suffering. I just feel as though you were a little child again and I must take you in my arms to comfort you. I say again that you are taking too morbid a view of it all."

"I cannot help it if you fail to understand my feelings."

"I know them well, Rotha."

"No, you do not; or you would not accuse me of being morbid, Meg. I told you that I wondered at myself for my forbearance; but I shall always feel as though I have wronged Robert Ord."

"And why him only—why not the others?"

"The others of course. But don't you see he

was her favourite, the child of her adoption, whom she loved and forgave at the last. Meg, you may call me over-scrupulous, unreasonable, anything you like ; but I know, and she knows that the money is his."

"Absurd ! it is yours by will. Have you not told me so yourself?"

"Of course I am mistress of Bryn ; but that does not alter my words. Meg, Mrs. Ord was going to destroy that will."

"Yes, I know."

"Every time she roused from that dreadful stupor she was trying to collect her faculties for the effort. She used to look at me so piteously, as though to ask me to help her ; but it was all no use : before she could say a word to us she was floating away again."

"True ; but was that your fault, Rotha?"

"Just before she died she beckoned me to her ; I could see her hands groping over her chest as though she wanted to write. She made me put my ear quite close to her lips, and as clearly as I hear you now, I heard her say, 'Rotha, mind it is all for Robert ;' and then the death-rattle stopped her. Meg, she was thinking of him then."

"I daresay, poor woman ! It was very sad."

"Yes, but saddest for him. I have heard so much of him, of them all—not from his aunt, she never mentioned them—but from Mr. Tracy and

the maid. They are all very good, but so poor and proud, and full of strange crotchets. They say that Robert Ord has been engaged for years, and now that they can never marry. How they must hate me, the very sound of my name! and yet you tell me that I am morbid."

"I say so still. I cannot take back my words."

"Perhaps not. You were always an obstinate woman."

"My dear, no; but simply straightforward and matter of fact, thank God, or how should I have got through my own troubles? You are too gentle and imaginative, Rotha. You are a brave creature, you have plenty of endurance, but you are so unselfish and scrupulous that you will wear yourself out."

"Scruples are not specially heinous sins, Meg."

"Are they not? I don't know. It seems to me that all this business is not in your hands at all: that this wealth has come to you by a direct interposition of Providence—whether for good or ill, the future and your own conduct must decide; but one thing I am sure of, that being yours, you will have to give an account of your stewardship."

Rotha dropped her head.

"My darling, I do feel as though I am very hard on you."

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"No, not hard ; but you are always so dreadfully sensible."

"I wish I were, I wish I were half as brave and forgiving as you, Rotha. Do you really mean that you will have the courage to face all those Ords now he has set them against you?"

"Of course if they will open their doors to me I shall go amongst them; but there is not much fear of that."

"They will not ask you to the Vicarage."

"Then assuredly we shall not meet, for they will never come to Bryn. Oh dear! oh dear, I wonder how the same village can hold us. I suppose once a week we shall all own we are miserable sinners together."


"You mean you will meet at church?"

"Well, I suppose so. I wonder if the Vicar will consider it his special mission to convert so hardened a reprobate. Meg, I declare I am so sick at heart, I would as lief joke about it as not."

"I would rather have your wobegone look than that."

"You will have plenty of both. I have not forgotten all my dry humour in spite of my misery. Anyhow, we shall have time to get tired of each other, for no one else will come to us. I wonder if I shall dare to visit the cottages; perhaps I shall if you mount guard at the door."

"Are you joking?"



"No, indeed ; I was in sober earnest."

"I thought you spoke as though I should be with you."

"Yes, of course ; but still I am not joking. One thing I can certainly assure you—that I shall never go to Bryn without you."

"Rotha, you cannot be serious ?"

"And why not ? Do you suppose that I can live by myself ? I should have thought Chatham Place and Miss Binks would have taught you propriety by this time."

"My dear, you must not allow yourself to be influenced by merely generous feeling. You think I am poor and lonely, and that is why you think of it."

"Perhaps so ; and because I am rather fond of you, in spite of your queer ways."

"As you would be fond of any other broken-down creature whom you could benefit. I know your goodness of old, Rotha."

"Goodness, eh ? Now you are going to make me angry. I have given you three reasons why I want you, but I have still another remaining."

"And what is that ?"

"That you are my only friend, and what I cannot demand as a right I must crave of your love."

"And do you really want me—really, Rotha ?" The harsh face was wonderfully softened now.

Yes, really and truly. Can anything be

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more natural ? I have known you half my life. When I was a lonely schoolgirl, and a still more lonely teacher, you were kind to me. It will give you more interest in life to know you are useful to some one. If we be not happy, at least we can make each other less miserable. Meg, will you come ?"

" Yes, I will. God bless you, Rotha !" And the warm hand-clasp set the seal to her words.



## CHAPTER VI.

## KIRKBY VICARAGE.

"It was a village built in a green rent  
Between two cliffs that skirt the dangerous bay."  
JEAN INGELow.

"Heart affluence in discursive talk  
From household fountains never dry;  
The critic clearness of an eye  
That saw thro' all the muses' walk.

"High nature amorous of the good,  
But touch'd with an ascetic gloom,  
And passion pure in sunny bloom  
Thro' all the fire of April blood.


"And manhood, fused with female grace,  
In such a sort the child would twine,  
A trustful hand, unask'd in thine,  
And find his comfort in thy face."

IN MEMORIAM.

"For contemplation he, and valour form'd;  
For softness she, and sweet attractive face:  
He for God only, she for God in him."

MILTON.

SOMEWHERE in the north of England there is a small seaport town called Blackscar. Now, though I am not prepared to prove on the united strength of guide-books and maps, (not to mention *Bradshaw*,) that there is such a place as Blackscar on the face of the earth, still I may as well frankly confess that with the licence




permissible to the writer of fiction, I have chosen this pseudonym for purposes of my own. It is a well known fact that the old Romans and Greeks used masks in their plays. On turning over an old edition of Terence the other day, I was much struck by the quaintness of one of its engravings, wherein were depicted the masks of the several characters ; some simply grotesque, others hideous, a few striving to portray feminine beauty, but still, one and all, masks. One could fancy the gestures of the actors as they rolled out the grand old words, and how hideously impassive those masks would remain in the mockery of a perpetual smile, stereotyped, profoundly ridiculous. I was forcibly reminded of this grotesque custom while cloaking reality under fictitious garb ; as the nervous débutant must have spoken out more boldly from the shelter of that strange disguise, so is it easier for the author to walk among bygone associations, calling things by other names—reciting their prologue and epilogue under the mask.

If I look in the guide-books I see Blackscar mentioned as a favourite sea-bathing resort, but it is wonderful how little they have to say about it. On the whole it is not a prepossessing place. Its chief attractions are its fine bay and extensive sands, but the town itself is tasteless, not being yet seasoned with the salt of fashion. It consists

mainly of one long street, or, as I should say, two, running as nearly as possible parallel with each other—the wide old-fashioned High Street, and the other looking seaward, embracing the small harborage, always full of fishing-smack, and such small gear, and the handsome sea-wall running directly on to Kirkby, a small suburb of Blackscar, which, as every one knows, looks as though it leads to the end of everything.

Kirkby, with which we have principally to do, is nothing more or less than a village, and its most enthusiastic admirer can find little to say in its praise. The first impression generally left on the visitor is a sense of meagreness and desolation. One looks over a narrow row of kitchen-gardens and grass hillocks to the grand sweep of sands beyond. There to the left is the low range of rabbit-warrens belonging to Bryn, and beyond the small slip of land stretching out into the sea like a one-pronged fork, called Welburn. At low tide one can discern the black shining edges of some dangerous-looking rocks, which tell a tale of their own. Shipwrecks are plentiful at Kirkby and Welburn, as their inhabitants know to their cost.

Kirkby itself is not conspicuous for beauty of architecture, except as concerns its church. It has its grammar-school, its rows of low bay-windowed lodging-houses, but those fronting the sea are principally cottages, to which the




kitchen-gardens appertain. Walking along the sandy road from Blackscar, and passing the schoolhouse, one sees first a patch of white-washed or yellow walls, with blinks of diamond-paned lattices, then a brown narrow house, with a window on each side of the door, and a scanty plot of ground in front ; next a low grey house, with old-fashioned bay-windows, and at the bend of the road, before the fence shuts off the stubbly looking land and distant furnaces, a substantial stone building, with its pleasant windows looking seaward,—and this is Bryn.

Bryn, from its many windows, looks straight down the Kirkby street and full at the grey old Vicarage, with Robert Ord's house adjoining it. The three gardens run parallel together, though they do not positively join. From the back they look over the purple range of the Leatham Hills. There is a certain weird look in that view by night. The church stands out finely, with its old lich-gate. The graves are sparse and scattered. From the church porch one can catch a glimpse of the dark sea line. Sometimes there is the fret of endless splashing. The sand comes swirling up the long road ; at night the blue blackness of the sky is illumined by the lurid fires from the distant furnaces. One comes out of the warm lighted church into the darkness, into the salt, cool air ; to the star-lit heavens ; to the silent, sleeping village ; and

the distant lights from the town. What a transition!

The Vicarage itself had a pleasant homely look; in reality it was once two houses. One never understood at first the multiplicity of small rooms and passages. There were enough and to spare: every one seemed to have his or her sitting-room, christened after its owner. There was the Vicar's study, and the Mother's room; Garton's den, which the boys shared; and the little outer study, in reality the Vicar's also, where they did their lessons. The dining-room was a mere passage-room, and was only used at meal-times. There was a continual cloth spread—a perpetual clatter of knives and forks. Upstairs was the gathering-place of the whole family, especially of an evening, and this was Belle's room; drawing-room being a title abhorred at the Vicarage.

The mother's room was suited for tête-à-têtes, for quiet droppings-in of two or three; a place for the Vicar to sit before the fire with his long coat tucked over his knees, and read his letters. It had a great crimson couch, appropriated by invalids. Here sick bodies and sick hearts were nursed by the mother herself. Every one loved the room; it was always so full of sunshine and sweet welcomes. The great window opened wide on the pleasant lawn, with its beds of scarlet geraniums and roses. Two



great ducks waddled and straddled all day among the flower beds, in company with a white kitten, and Jock and Jasper, the Vicar's two dogs. Here the mother sat in her low chair, with her work-baskets, repairing dilapidated garments, and minding her youngest born ; but dear as the room was, the family reunions were always, by mutual consent, held in Belle's room.

There, there was more space and less cosiness ; then its windows were so delightful, the front bay looking over the sands and the rabbit-warren, and the back, as we have said before, looking over the Leatham Hills, though one could not see the church itself.

Here there was everything for the needs and requirements of a family. A sweet-toned piano and a harmonium, a large round table, plenty of easy chairs, writing desks, and drawing boards, and much wholesome litter ; everything a little shabby, perhaps ; the chintz, a pretty Chinese blue, pieced and faded : but as Guy somewhat vaguely expressed it, " a lump of comfort."

Robert Ord, walking along the sea-wall and looking across at the sunset, has a pretty tolerable picture of it, and the party sure to be assembled in it at this hour. For it is just after tea and before the bell rings out for the evening service ; the day's work is over, and the Vicar and his boys are sure not to be far apart.

Yes ; sure enough there is the Vicar in his

usual place before the fireless grate, haranguing his boys and his women-folk to his heart's content, and possibly to theirs too, to judge from their faces. You could not be in that room two minutes and not discover for yourself, that in spite of freedom and exemption from rules, it was a well-ordered household; patriarchal almost in its simplicity, the man being, as he should be, the head of the house, the woman the help-meet for him.

Look well at Austin Ord and his wife, for without doubt they are a goodly pair. Perhaps the Vicar is a little ponderous—not that he need pray just yet to be delivered from the burden of his flesh—but he is a large, grand-looking man, with everything large about him.

Not that he is specially well favoured: Robert is the only handsome Ord amongst them. But he has a face that does you good to look at. The mouth may be a little querulous or obstinate, but the forehead is so massive, and the large grey eyes open so widely and honestly and yet so keenly; there is such strength and such goodwill; there is something so boyish too in the crisp curly hair, that never can be straightened, and which one sees reproduced on the obstinate heads of his growing lads.

The time has gone past for calling Mary Ord beautiful: cares and the harass of daily life have sharpened the round cheek, and taken away its

bloom ; the cheek is very thin and white now, the Vicar thinks sometimes, with a sigh ; but still she has never been fairer in his eyes, and in truth there is still much comeliness left.

The mother, or Mother Mary, as her brothers-in-law persist in calling her, was just one of those soft-looking women whom it was impossible not to love. She was not very young, but as yet no grey had touched her pretty wavy hair. She had just the same wide-open grey eyes as her husband, only perhaps they opened more softly than his, and her laugh had the same happy clear ring in it. She was one of those mothers whose arms and laps are never quite empty. Her great boys liked to rest there still sometimes. Mother's shoulder always rested their aching heads ; to them it was their natural pillow. Garton, in spite of his three-and-twenty years, liked to crouch at her footstool, in company with Jock and Jasper, and it was Arty's favourite place. I defy you to have been with her an hour and not have opened your heart to her. It was not that she was so clever, but that her sympathy was always ready.

Belle, who had double her attractions, was not half so lovable ; not that she ever failed in gentleness, but she was always so preoccupied. It was rather sad at times to watch the younger sister. There was a grave, abstracted,



anxious expression about her face that marred its beauty. At such times she would look like a faded queen. Mary Ord was often tired, painfully overwrought, perhaps a trifle querulous, but there was no such expression in her face, though mind and body were often sorely overtaxed; and only she and her husband knew with what difficulty they made ends meet and provided for their growing boys. No anxiety ever seemed to rob her for long of her sweet content. She was one of those women who take a man for better and for worse, and who when the worse comes makes no ado, but works on cheerfully as long as strength lasts.

Belle was equally courageous, but she failed in the cheerfulness. She was quiet, but it was not the quiet of repose; perhaps her long engagement was trying her; perhaps Robert Ord, in spite of his fondness, was not a very patient lover. Some men are apt to be a little peremptory and domineering with the woman they love. In spite of their mutual affection they were not perfectly suited to each other.


Unfortunately, Belle was of a shy, reserved nature. She was not one to talk much of her own feelings at any time. Robert, who was quick and ardent, felt himself sometimes almost repulsed by her silence. At such times he would reproach her in no measured words. But I don't think she ever fully answered him. He

would come round presently, touched by the gentleness and sorrow in her face, and try and atone for his anger, and she would not reject such atonement; but as she sat with her hand in his, she would be longing to tell him, that he was dearer to her than anything in the world—that if needs be she could die for him, but that she could not open her lips to answer his reproaches. Those who did not know Belle Clinton called her cold; but they were wrong. There was no coldness about her; she would have worked her fingers to the bone for Mary and her boys. When they were ill she nursed them night and day. But not even to her sister could she fully open her heart. She would sit at her side for hours, working silently, or letting her chat about her boys and parish; but when the conversation turned to her own affairs, either evading her questions or answering them with grave reserve, till Mary was obliged to quit the subject.

The Vicar used to quiz Belle rather mercilessly for this failing of hers. In his heart he thought her rather tame and spiritless. His own wife had a brisk tongue of her own, and was much given to state her opinions on all subjects rather freely; but I think he loved such briskness. Belle's unsociality was rather a blot in the family merriment. In his eyes she was too much given to occupy her own corner, though it must be

owned that she was seldom quite alone in it. Belle's special nook was by the window that looked over the Kirkby sands: here she could see down the village street. She knew the exact time that Robert would come from his daily work at Thornborough, and would be at the window watching for him as he went into his own gate. He and Garton would sit down every evening to their solitary meal. By-and-by, when the Vicarage folk were gathering round their more social board, the brothers would come in—Robert having freed himself from the dust and smoke of the day—and take their special places—Robert by Belle, and Garton under his sister-in-law's wing; but they would rarely join in the meal itself. Austin had too many mouths to feed already, Robert always said. He would let both Austin and Mary know sometimes how it galled his pride to see his future wife dependent on their hands. He used to tell Belle so over and over again. I don't think it made her position more comfortable. Belle was working quietly in her corner now, while the Vicar was holding out on the subject of church decorations, Mary and the boys making their comments. The lads always mixed up freely in their parents' conversation—sometimes interrupting—as after this manner—

“I say, father,” quoth Guy, the eldest, a big, broad-shouldered lad, with his father's curly head



caricatured to a nicety, "wont Garton turn rusty if you say anything to him about it?" For by a sort of tacit understanding the boys never called Garton uncle, though they were profoundly respectful to Robert, and, strange to say, their parents never disapproved of this freemasonry. "They can't help seeing that he's half a boy himself," as the Vicar said, who was rather more indulgent to his younger brother than Robert was ever likely to be.

"Garton wont like your interfering, Austin," observed Mary; "the decorations are quite in his province." And then she took mental measurements, to judge from the way in which she was eyeing a piece of black serge.

"Gar should choose a more efficient staff of workers then," retorted the Vicar; "his designs are very good—rather elaborate, perhaps—but then he's such a capital hand himself: all I complain about is, that there is no such thing as satisfying the womenkind—they are always taking offence: if you appoint one to wreathe the font she is sure to turn sulky because she is not elected to do the chancel. Why, there was quite a mutiny last harvest festival amongst the Misses Travers, and all because Miss Knowles had the pulpit and lectern, and they only the reading-desk. It is no good Garton having the management, if they are to come and bother me for weeks beforehand."


"But there can be no talk about a harvest festival for months to come, Austin : why, this is only the end of June." And Mary put down her black serge with a sigh which the Misses Travers' wrongs had certainly not evoked.

"Can't you make that do?" interrupted the Vicar, with some appearance of interest.

"No, it will want another breadth. Arty grows so. I wish I could afford a suit for him. He does look so shabby at church on Sunday morning."

"I never see anything but his clean collar," replied the Vicar, leaning forward to pat the head of a very small boy curled up on his mother's footstool. "Never mind ; Arty must wait, that's all. No, of course, there's no question of another festival till the harvest is in, you silly woman. What put it in my head was, I was walking down towards Leatham with Farmer Dykes, and he was showing me his crops. 'I hope I shall have some sheaves, as usual, this autumn,' I observed ; and he promised me I should have some oats and barley as well as wheat, and then I remembered that you always get them from another man."

"Never mind ; we shall only have a double supply," returned Mary. She was rather absent, for a wonder : her mind was still running on the serge. "I can't help wishing I could have done without that new dress,



Austin ; but my old one was too shabby, I am afraid."

"I don't know how you could have avoided putting on mourning for my aunt, Mary, if that is what you mean." The Vicar's voice was a little displeased.

"My dear Austin, what an idea! I should have worn my old black gown, of course ; but I daresay you are right, and new mourning is more respectful. There, I won't say any more about it. Arty must go shabby this summer, poor little fellow!" and Mary put away the serge resolutely, and consoled herself with kissing the white glossy curls.

"I do wonder," she continued presently, looking up at her husband cheerfully, "what has prevented Robert from writing to us?"

"Writing?—nonsense! Belle has a letter, I believe."

"Yes, just a line to say why he was detained. But he must know how anxious we all are."

"No news is good news, mother," observed Guy.

"I don't know," she repeatedly, doubtfully ; "it does seem to me that if he had any good news to impart he would not have kept us in such suspense—it is not like him."

"No, it is not," returned the Vicar, slowly.

"If it were Garton he would delight in keeping us all in the dark, and startling us by a


sudden burst of good news when we had ceased to expect it. But Robert is different—and then he has Belle to consider.” And she looked across significantly at her sister; but Belle did not raise her head.

“There’s Garton himself! Talk of the—et cetera, you know,” began Guy, laughing; but his father shook his head warningly. He never preached long sermons to his boys, but he was quick in rebuking them. In a minute there was a rush of all four lads to the window, Arty scrambling up on the window seat in the greatest hurry of all.

The two younger boys were great contrasts to each other. Rupert was a long, loose-limbed fellow, rather plain in face, and somewhat freckled; Laurence, or, as he was generally called, Laurie, was a slight fair boy, very tall and slender, and carrying himself with a slow, sleepy grace of movement which won for him the name of Lazy Laurie. All three boys sang in the choir, but Laurie’s voice was the sweetest of all.

“Halloa, Garton, where’s the Shadow?” shouted saucy Guy, as he leant over his brother’s head. A tall, dark young man, in a flapping wideawake and a long and rather singularly-cut coat, looked up as he swung back the little brown gate, and nodded to the boys.

“All right; I am coming in directly. Robert’s up at Blackscar.”



"You don't mean it!"

Belle put down her work and listened breathlessly. The interjection came from the Vicar.

"Yes, he is: he has a little business detaining him, but he asked me to come on and let you know he was here."

"There's the church bell, Gar!"

"So there is. Never mind. I must come up a moment. I want to speak to Mother Mary."

Two of the boys ran down to open the door directly, with Arty trotting after them, sure of a ride upstairs again on his uncle's shoulder; and true enough there he was a minute afterwards, his small face completely hoodwinked by Garton's wide-awake, and shouting lustily.

I wish I could describe Garton Ord; I wish I could describe him standing up so erect in the sunlight, with his shabby coat buttoned closely over his broad chest; but I am loth to try, I am so certain to fail.


I suppose most people would consider him a plain man—at least, not exactly a handsome one; but his individuality would have distinguished him among a thousand; and yet it was a singular face too, almost an ascetic one, with its brown, irregular features, and dark, closely-cropped hair. When at rest there was something a little stern and sad about it; but then it



was seldom in repose. With every change of thought or feeling the irregular features worked powerfully. Never was there such a face for betraying emotion of any kind. At any sally from the boys there would be a display of white teeth; the muscles would relax, there would be wonderful puckers and lines; and at the least provocation the strong frame rocked to and fro with suppressed merriment.

Never was there such restlessness, such continued movement, in any man—never such quick transition from one extreme to another. People could not make out Garton Ord, the boyish ascetic baffled them; there was too great a mingling of the ridiculous and the sublime in his nature; no one seemed quite to understand which predominated, any more than they could understand the cause of his variable temperament. Robert called him weak, and vowed that he wanted ballast. But Austin, more accustomed to read human nature, was wont to speak highly of his purity and singleness of aim; and no one regretted more than he when a stubborn fit of illness prevented Garton from obtaining his degree. He had always set his heart on securing him as his curate, and he was consequently grievously disappointed when his brother failed to pass.

"It is just like my bad luck, Austin," he groaned, when the Vicar came in to comfort him;



"but I don't think I should take it to heart so much if it were not for Robert."

"Robert is just as sorry as I am, Gar."

"Yes, but not for the same reasons. He is thinking about how he is to give me bread-and-butter, I suppose. He will have it that if I had read more I should not have failed in obtaining my degree."

"I think with him that you do not read enough."

"But I suppose that you will allow that I could not help my illness?"

"No, indeed—that was very unfortunate."

"Everything is unfortunate; but if Robert means to make himself disagreeable because I have failed, I may just as well get quit of the whole business."

"I thought you had set your heart on entering the Church;" and then, as he noticed Garton's face work in an agitated manner, he put his hand kindly on his shoulder.

"Well, never mind; don't be downhearted, Gar. I don't think you are to blame in this instance. You know Robert's special grievance is that you waste half your time with boys. Perhaps it would be as well to check that a little; a curate can't have half-a-dozen village lads perpetually at his heels."

"Do you mean to class Guy and Laurie among village lads?" demanded his brother, sulkily.

"Well, no; I had some one else in my mind just then. Well, we wont talk any more about that. The lad's a nice lad, though you are taking him out of his proper place. What Robert and I have to consider now, is how we are to contrive to give you another chance."


"I suppose it is no good applying to Aunt Charlotte again?"

"I wont have you attempt it. No, we must wait a little, and see how things turn out. I suppose by a little contrivance we might manage it; that is, if Robert gets a rise. But it is rather hard that you should be a drag on him, poor fellow!"

"I think I had better give it up, Austin."

"No, no; not till we have thought over it a little. In the meantime you can do the part of a lay curate, and help me with the boys; and we will read together when I have time." And then the Vicar took up his felt hat and went out.

And so Garton was eating his brother's bread and grumbling terribly over it; but he did what he could in return. He taught the Vicar's boys, and was his right hand in the parish. He was sacristan and leader of the choir, and sometimes bell-ringer too; he turned those thews and sinews of his to account. Often at five o'clock in the morning he was digging in the Vicar's garden, or in their own adjoining; though he was not always punctual in his readings with his brother,



he was always in his place at the two daily services. People used to marvel to see the brown, ascetic face always in the choir-stall. Ten minutes after he would be striding away to the school-house, still in his cassock, with a troop of boys after him, laughing as heartily as any.

"Well, Garton, what is it you want with me?" asked Mrs. Ord, when Arty had been rescued from his perilous position and deposited on her lap.

"Oh, it is only a lot of surplices I want you and Belle to mend; can't stop to explain now; facts speak for themselves." And he pointed breathlessly to Laurie, whose arms were closely packed with rather dingy-looking linen.

"All those for me, Garton?" And Mary looked rather alarmed.

"Yes; one or two are slit down, and some of the sleeves must be curtailed in length; and Symond's is too long for him, and—and——"

"Oh, go away," returned Mrs. Ord, good-humouredly, packing him off; "you can leave them on the table till you have time to explain. How long did Robert say that he would be?"

"Half an hour or so; couldn't get a word out of him. It is my opinion he looks rather——" And then Garton stopped, and looked hesitatingly at Belle.

"Rather what? No; she is not listening, Gar."

"Oh, I don't know ; let's wait and hear what he has got to say for himself. Come along boys ;" and he was out of the room in a moment.

"What did Garton mean by his unfinished sentence, Mary ?" asked Belle, when they were left alone.

"I don't know ; you heard as much as I did. I am afraid he thinks that Robert has not very good news to communicate."

"I never expected any very good news."

"No ; nor I."

"But still I am afraid Robert does. And after all, Mary, she may have left him a little."

"Oh, a little would be something."

"Of course it would. They want Garton to make up for the time he has lost during his illness. As far as that goes I think his reading with Austin is a failure."

"I don't think Austin will ever make much of him."

"Robert says he is too much a Jack-of-all-trades in the village. He has too much and too little to do ; in his opinion he wants to be regularly coached as he calls it,—he is so lax and desultory. But I don't think he ought to look to Robert or to Austin either for any further help."

"Austin is too rash and generous, considering he has four boys of his own," replied Mary, who in her secret mind was still hankering after the serge frock for Arty ; "and yet I think we must

all allow that it would be a pity for Garton to waste his college education. Austin is so sure that his heart is quite set upon entering the Church."

"Yes; if we could only depend on his health and application. But if Robert could have his way, I am sure he would be in a situation at Thornborough by this time."

"Oh, we all know Robert's opinion," returned Mary, rather hastily; and then the conversation dropped.

## CHAPTER VII.

## MISS MATURIN IS SENT TO COVENTRY.

"But when the heart is full of din,  
And doubt beside the portals waits,  
They can but listen at the gates  
And hear the household jar within."

IN MEMORIAM.

"Over proud of course,  
Even so! But not so stupid . . blind . . that I,  
Whom thus the great Taskmaster of the world  
Has set to meditate mistaken work,  
My dreary face against a dim blank wall,  
Throughout man's natural lifetime could pretend  
Or wish."  
AURORA LEIGH.

IN spite of Garton's prophesied half hour, Robert Ord never made his appearance till the elder branches of the family were gathered round the supper-table. Belle, who had stayed away from the evening service in the secret hope of securing a quiet talk with him before the others came in, was much chagrined at the failure of her little scheme, but as usual she kept her disappointment to herself. But the Vicar was not quite so reticent.

"I can't think what possesses Robert to absent himself like this!" he said, rather irritably, as he cut the thick slices of bread with no very sparing

hand. "He is certainly treating us rather cavalierishly." And then they heard the door-bell ring, and a moment after Robert Ord was amongst them. He went the round of greetings in his ordinary manner. Nevertheless the Vicar and his wife exchanged meaning glances as he took his seat silently at the table. The Ord look—as Mary called it—was strong on him this evening, and already they augured no good news from his face. Belle as she made room for him could not conceal her anxiety.

"How tired you look, Robert! Are you sure you are not ill?" she asked, in a low voice—not willing, however, that her question should be overheard. But Robert was in no mood for such soft questioning.

"Tired! Well, I suppose I am; but I don't see how the failure of one night's rest is to make me ill;" then Belle knew that things were not going well with him.

"I think you might have written and explained matters a little," began the Vicar, in a slightly aggrieved tone. "You might have understood that it was impossible for us not to feel anxious."

"I should certainly have written if I had had any good tidings to communicate."

"Ah! that was just what Mary said. Some of us were flattering ourselves that no news was good news; but she would have nothing to say to such lying prophets."



"Mary was perfectly right."

Then the Vicar remained silent.

"I thought you would understand how it was, Austin."

"Well, perhaps I did; but one can't help being like Pandora's box, and having a little bit of hope at the bottom."

"Ah, that was just my case."

"Do you mean to say," began the Vicar again, after a pause, and letting his knife fall heavily from his hand, "do you mean to say that she has willed away all that property?"

"Every penny."

"That she has left you literally nothing?"

"Nothing at all, Austin."

"Good heavens! What injustice! Not to any of us—not even to Garton?"

"Certainly not to Garton. I was not aware that you expected a reversal in your own favour."

"To tell you the truth, Robert, I have got quite as much as I expected. I knew her better than any of you. Perhaps, as I said before, I had a lurking hope that it might be found that she had remembered one of us at the last; but I was never so sanguine as you were."

"I always told myself that I had no hope at all."

"Oh, but you had—one could see it in your face. You were too much excited—you looked a different man that morning when you started. I took

myself to task afterwards that I had not given you a word of warning."

"I don't think I needed the warning, Austin."

"But I should have given it to you all the same; and I feel now as though some such word of consolation is due from me, but for the life of me I hardly know how to say it."

"I think you may reserve it, as we are all fellow sufferers."

"Yes, but then the cases differ. My injuries are the same certainly, but then I did not permit myself to hope. I knew that there would be no absolving of such an offence as I had committed; but with you it was otherwise."

"I suppose I may be considered the chief mourner?" But the Vicar was too much in earnest to comprehend the bitter joke.

"Oh, as to that, there was not much love lost on either side; but I must say that I think you have been shamefully used, Robert." Then Mary got up and came round to her husband.

"Mary thinks that you deserve equal pity," observed Robert, on whom this little bye-play was not lost.

"No, she cannot think that."

"Oh, but I do, Austin! I think you made quite as great a sacrifice for me as ever Robert did for Belle. And there is something else that I think——"

"What is that, Polly?" The Vicar often called his wife by this homely term of endearment.

"I think you are both, so good and noble, that all this loss will be made up to you. I am not a bit afraid of poverty for you, Austin; and were you ten times poorer I would not change my opinion that I am the happiest woman in the world." And so saying she kissed her husband's hand. No wonder that the Vicar felt himself comforted.

"You forget, Mary, that Belle is not equally fortunate," said Robert, still more bitterly. "Remember she has not the comfort of feeling that she is bearing poverty for my sake."

"Ah, I see what you mean."


"I think Austin is lucky in having such a wife; in my opinion he is scarcely to be pitied at all."

"That is just what I think," interrupted the Vicar, with a proud look at his Mary.

"Of course he has been injured; but then it is the duty of his cloth to forgive all such injury. He has certainly many mouths to feed, but as yet there has been no difficulty in feeding them."

"Mary and I know better than that," replied Austin. "But you are right, Robert; somehow in one's needs, one always finds 'the stone rolled away' at the right moment."

"Yes, and then you have the happiness of



doing the day's work together. I think you will allow that our case is somewhat different."

"Belle is not a bit afraid of poverty either; take my word for it," exclaimed Mrs. Ord. Then Belle looked up and made a sign for her sister to be silent.

"I am not going to try her courage just yet, Mary. We have been engaged for more than four years now; and, as far as I can see, we shall have four more to wait."

"Oh, I hope not."

"What is to prevent it? Sometimes I think we shall never be married." Then Mary saw that Belle gave a long shiver.

"I declare that I am getting quite desperate; Austin knows that I am. And to think that only a designing girl stands between me and my happiness!" And Robert Ord's face darkened as he remembered that interview in Eglistone Abbey.

"My dear Robert, I don't understand you. I thought all the money had gone to some hospital or other?"

"No; I have kept back that part to the last. Don't go away, Garton; the story is too good to be lost. I think you ought all to know what sort of a neighbour we are going to have at Bryn." And then as they pressed round him, he told them of his talk with Mr. Tracy.

"A designing woman, indeed!" exclaimed

Mary, who was rather given to be a little rash in her judgment.

"What do you think of that, your Reverence?" asked Garton. He had never ceased for one moment to rock himself slowly during the conversation, and as he asked the question his teeth quite gleamed from under his slight moustache. But the Vicar made no answer.

"Did you accuse her to her face?" asked Belle, whose indignation was stronger even than Mary's.

"Well, not at first." And then he went on to tell them about the thunderstorm and the strange meeting in the ruined abbey, and how the accusation had been drawn from him; and after that Mary again gave it as her opinion that Miss Maturin must be a very designing person.

"No wonder she was afraid when she met you in the Castle garden, Robert."

"Yes, and to think that I was fool enough to pity her; and then there was that want of anger on her part that was enough to excite any man's suspicion."

"She would certainly have defended herself if she had been innocent—don't you think so, Austin?" But the Vicar was again silent; he had left his chair and was walking up and down the room with heavy footsteps; it seemed as though he hardly dared trust himself to speak.

"Yes, of course she would, Robert. I can't think how you could have been so forbearing."

"Well, I don't know myself, Mary. There was something about her that in spite of her sin almost disarmed anger; she looked so wretchedly unhappy."

"I am glad of it; she will find that her ill-gotten riches will only bring misery to her after all. I declare I can hardly believe in such duplicity and double-dealing."

"My dear!" The rebuke came from her husband.

"Let me speak, Austin. I don't wonder at all now that Robert should have felt it so bitterly; it makes it almost unbearable for him and Belle."

"What has Belle got to do with it? It is all the same to her whether the money goes to a hospital or to Miss Maturin."

"No, not quite, Austin."

"Isn't it, Belle? Well, I should have thought so." And then the Vicar resumed his walk.

"And what makes it worse for us all is that she is coming to Bryn." And Mary, who had been rather chilled by her husband's last words, roused herself again to renewed anger. "I can't imagine how she can have the boldness to show her face among us."

"That is just my feeling," argued Belle.

"She will be visiting the cottages, and put-

ting down her name in the list of charities. Those sort of people always do."

"Very probably, my dear."

"And she will waylay you and pretend to be interested in the schools, and play at being Lady Bountiful; and perhaps even she will come to you for advice, Austin!" And Mrs. Ord opened her eyes very widely.

"Perhaps she will, Mary; and then certainly I shall give it her. I think I can promise you that it will be sound, wholesome advice."

"Oh, Austin, you are not joking?"

"No, indeed; I was never more serious in my life."

"His Reverence has got some crotchet in his head. I should not be surprised if he is going to prove to us that we are all wrong in our judgment."

"Well, I must say that I do think you are all a little too hard on Miss Maturin."

"There!—I told you so," returned Garton, triumphantly.

"No, no, Gar; don't misunderstand me. Robert looks quite troubled enough without that. I am not at all disposed to be too charitable in my estimate of this young lady. I think it is quite possible that Robert's opinion may be right."

"Of course it is right."

"Yes, it is quite possible; he is generally

tolerably correct in his surmises about people ; but it is not fair to condemn wholly on circumstantial evidence. I don't think you need treat her as though she were quite a Pariah, Mary."

" Now, Austin ! "

" Robert may be mistaken, you know."

" Oh, I don't think that at all likely."

" Well, I don't know. Mr. Tracy is as shrewd an observer of human nature as Robert—and you see he defended her."

" Mr. Tracy is an old fool, who is talked over by any soft-spoken woman who likes to take the trouble," interrupted Robert, wrathfully.

" Well, he may be, but still he is a clever lawyer, and he was loth to cast the first stone, you see. I say again that we ought not to condemn her entirely on circumstantial evidence."

" I shall hold my own opinion, Austin."

" Well, so shall I, and you see I am disposed to agree with you ; but here is Mary talking as though she cannot say her prayers in the same church with her."

" That is because she takes my view of the subject."

" I don't believe any of us differ from you, Robert ; but I can't say I am much struck by either your or Mary's Christian feeling."

" Please don't get up in the pulpit, Austin."

" Oh, but I must," and the Vicar made him-



self look very big as he spoke. "I think both Mary and you deserve a sermon, and I am going to deliver one." Then Mary looked up in his face with soft appealing eyes.

"I daresay you are right, Robert, and that Miss Maturin did obtain an undesirable influence over Aunt Charlotte during those four years; but then I do not think that we ought to shut our eyes to her youth and temptation. In her case, perhaps, we might have done likewise."

"Well, I don't see that."

"Nay, Robert; it was a position of awful temptation for any girl—especially when she was poor and homeless."

"That is what I told her. Remember I was the first to excuse her. I was not half so hard upon her as she deserved."

"No, you were tolerably merciful; it is only women who use nothing but superlatives in their anger. Don't shake your head, Mary; I am ashamed of you."

"Never mind what he says, Mary."

"You are not a bit fit to be a clergyman's wife. Robert is quite fiery enough without your stirring him to fresh anger; and it seems to me that as long as we are deprived of it, it cannot matter to us who has Aunt Charlotte's money."

"Austin, how can you be so absurd?"

"Absurd, am I? Never mind, there is method



in my madness. I assure you that it does not make the slightest difference to me who has the property, providing the hands that hold it are clean."

"I am glad you have added that proviso."

"Yes, indeed—that is of the greatest moment to me. Think of the influence over the parish."

"Oh, I am not thinking about that."

"But I am, and that is why Mary made me tremble. Think how terrible it would be to have a person of that sort up at Bryn. I don't look at it quite with Mary's eyes, but nevertheless I think my position will be an awkward one."

"That's your own look-out, Austin. I know what I should do in your case."

"So do I. You would have me follow her advice and send Miss Maturin to Coventry."

"Austin, I do think you are very naughty."

"Was not that what you wished me to do, Mary? There will be no possibility of crossing over to the other side, unfortunately, unless we land ourselves among the cabbages; but I will promise to draw down my felt hat over my eyes whenever I see Miss Maturin approaching; but I must be sure first that it is Miss Maturin."

"Austin, you ought not to joke, for Robert's sake."

"I don't think there's much joking left in me to-night, but then, you will keep interrupting my sermon. What I really meant was, that I wish

to reserve my opinion; in anything so grave as this, I must certainly judge for myself.

"Well, that is reasonable."

"I think we are all too interested to be quite unbiassed in our judgment. Mary and Belle will of course follow Robert blindly. Women are always like sheep jumping through a gap in a hedge—one takes the first leap and then the others follow. I don't know quite what Garton thinks."

"I have not the vestige of a doubt. Of course we all condemn Miss Maturin."

"Ah, then indeed she will go to Coventry. I think I see a flaw here and there in your arguments, and Mary especially is not charitable; but I do not mean to compromise myself: six months hence you shall have my verdict."


"Guilty or Not Guilty, I wonder?"

"Oh, that is impossible for me to say; at present it is decidedly, Not Proven. There, I have finished my sermon. I think you can find out the text for yourselves."

"The best part about it is its brevity," observed Robert, dryly, as he rose. "Come, Belle, I want to say a word to you before I go. Good-night, Austin."

The Vicar looked at the timepiece.

"Why, it is getting very late, I declare. Garton, you had better be off too, as you have to be up so early in the morning."



"And, Robert, don't keep Belle up," said Mary, as the door closed upon the three, and she and her husband were left alone. Mary, as usual, had her work in her hands, but the Vicar sat doing nothing.

"Have you any letters to write to-night, Austin?"

"Yes, several; but I don't feel as though I could write them now, Mary. I do feel all this terribly."

"I am sure you do."

"I did not want Robert to know how sorry I was for him. Did you ever see a man so changed in a few days?"

"He looks very haggard, certainly."

"For the matter of that, so does Belle. I am beginning to think that this engagement will do neither of them any good. Belle's beauty is not a bit what it was, and she is losing flesh visibly."

"I think Robert tries her a little."

"I am sure he does. He is not the man to bear all this waiting patiently. Upon my word I can see very little hope for them both."

"Don't you think he might ask for an increase of salary, Austin?"

"No, I am certain that would not answer. It won't make their case better for us all to sit down and bemoan ourselves in sackcloth and

ashes, but I almost feel as though it would be comfortable."

Then Mary put down her work and came a little closer.

"Austin, I can see how grieved you are."

"I am horribly grieved, Mary. I don't say that I expected otherwise, but still it is such a cruel thing for him."

"Oh, I can't give him all my pity."

"Nay, there you are wrong, Polly. It is so many years since I lost Aunt Charlotte's good graces that I have almost forgotten my special grievance. I was never such a favourite as he was, remember."

"Perhaps not."

"I won't deny that I have my private disappointment. Of course, if Robert had had Bryn we should all have been in a better position. Belle would have been off our hands, and Garton also, and there's no knowing what he would have done for the boys."

"No, indeed; Robert is always so generous."

"But it is no good thinking of that. To tell you the truth, Mary, I am half afraid to look into this year's expenses; Garton's illness and then Laurie's have used up all my surplus money."

"You ought not to have paid Garton's doctor's bill."

"What could I do? I could not leave it on

Robert's shoulders. Affairs seem so complicated just now. I wanted to tell you this evening that you might have bought that frock for Arty, but upon my word I could not reconcile it with my conscience."

"Oh, Austin, how could you think of such a thing?"

"But I did. I did so hate to see you look so disappointed, Mary, and to hear you begrudging that common stuff gown of yours. I wonder who deserves to wear a silk one more than you do?"

"Silk for me? No, thank you. I am happier in my old stuff one—though I am not fit to be a clergyman's wife;" and Mary smiled playfully in his face.

"Oh, but I was not serious, you know."

"I was half afraid you were. I certainly did feel very angry."

"Did you, Polly?"

"Yes, of course I did; and Belle got quite white with anger."

"I don't think Belle's anger was so fierce as mine though; when I walked up and down it was because I dared not trust myself to speak. If I had spoken I should have terrified you, and yet Robert thinks I am cool."

"I am afraid he does."

"Let him think so; it is no good heaping fuel on a furnace. I think my wrath would

have matched his. And then it occurred to me that we were all condemning Miss Maturin merely on his evidence."

"And then you scolded me."

"You were the sheep that was foremost in leaping, Mary. Robert's gap was a tolerably wide one. My dear, I must positively see this young woman, and judge for myself, before I can accept his opinion."

"Oh, of course, Austin. Well, perhaps I was a little hasty."

"We are all prejudiced against Miss Maturin ; we must therefore be careful to form our estimate all the more slowly. As the Vicar of this parish, I shall not be able to avoid coming into very close contact with so influential a member of my congregation."

"But, Austin, she may be a Baptist."

"I never thought of that."

"Or a Unitarian."

"Oh, I hope not."

"Or a Plymouth sister, or something of that sort."

"Very well, Mary ; then you will not have quite so much trouble with your prayers on Sunday ; but of course I shall be very strenuous in my efforts to bring her over to the Church."

Then Mrs. Ord had nothing to say.

"I suppose if you really become convinced that Robert is right, we need have nothing at

all to do with her?" she began again, after a pause.

"Robert did not say so. After all, Mary, he is more forbearing than you."

"No, but seriously, Austin?"

"Seriously, then, we shall not be able to avoid it, I am afraid; but at least I can promise you this—that we will do as little as we can." And after that the Vicar betook himself to his study, and Mary went up to her sister.

It was her motherly custom to see all her sons tucked up safely in their beds before she retired to her own, and however weary she might be she never omitted this duty. Often a restless sleeper stirred at the light kiss and whispered blessing. When Belle first came to the Vicarage Mrs. Ord included her in her rounds as a matter of course, but it must be confessed that Belle derived no special delectation from her sister's visits. She was unsociable by nature, and at such times she preferred the solace of her own thoughts.

Mary found her sitting by the open window with her head on her hand.

"What! up and dressed still, Belle? Have you any idea how late it is?"

"Yes; I expect it is very late."

"Ah, that is just what makes you so thin. Do you know Austin has been making some uncomplimentary remarks about your looks



to-night. I wonder what he would say now if he saw you?"

"Austin is never complimentary to me, Mary."

"Now, Belle, that is too bad."

"No, indeed he is not—he is always drawing comparisons between us. Of course a man must think well of his own wife. But sometimes I wish he would leave me alone altogether."

"You would not say so if you knew how sorry he was for you both to-night. I have hardly ever seen him more grieved about anything."

"I don't think he was particularly kind to Robert."

"You mean that he did not talk to him much. But that was because he would not trust himself to speak. You know Austin is sometimes afraid to say all he thinks."

"But all the same, he need not hurt Robert with that half-joking manner of his. I don't believe he understands it."

"Oh, Belle! that is only his way."

"It is not a pleasant way, Mary; it makes him seem as though he did not feel for people in their trouble. Robert always says it shuts him up so; he has gone away quite hurt to-night."

"Then it is very foolish of Robert. Never mind; Austin means to have a talk with him to-morrow. The fact is, Belle, he thinks we are

all a little premature in our judgment about Miss Maturin."

"Oh! if he has talked you over, Mary, I have nothing more to say."

"I don't know what you mean by talking me over, but I am not going to get vexed with you, Belle. I can see that you are dreadfully unhappy." Then Belle turned her head away without speaking.

"Robert has no right to make you so wretched. If he goes on much longer in this way, I shall speak to him myself."

"Oh, Mary! you must not think of such a thing."

"But I shall. Here Austin says you are losing flesh visibly. Every one notices how pale and thin you are getting."

"I wish every one would mind their own business."

"Oh, Belle!"

"I do, indeed. How can I help his making me wretched? I cannot alter his nature."

"There, you have found it out at last."

"I don't see what there was to find. Of course he is miserable, poor fellow! and of course his misery makes him impatient. Any one but Austin would see what he suffers."

"I don't envy you the first three months that Miss Maturin is at Bryn."

"I don't envy myself, Mary. But at least I

can understand and share his feelings. He said to-night that he knew where to come for sympathy." Then Belle got up and made some little demonstration as though she would prepare herself for her couch ; on seeing which, Mrs. Ord kissed and bade her good night. But as she tucked up Arty, she told herself that she had not done much to comfort her sister. But in truth Belle was not one that could be easily comforted.

## CHAPTER VIII.

## BELLE STAYS AWAY AGAIN FROM SERVICE.


“And now be patient with me; do not think  
 I’m speaking from a false humility.  
 The truth is, I am grown so proud with grief,  
 And He has said so often through his nights  
 And through his mornings, ‘Weep a little still.’

I gave you love?  
 I think I did not give you anything;  
 I was but yours only. . . .” AURORA LEIGH.

BELLE had got up, as we have seen, and had made some little demonstration of preparing herself for the night. She had moved across the room and wound up her watch in a decided sort of way, and her sister had understood her and taken the hint; but when the door had closed upon Mrs. Ord, all Belle’s briskness of movement had ceased, and she had dropped down again into the chair by the window, propping her cheek upon her hand, and staring moodily across the dark road to the darker sea-line beyond. Mary had complained to her of the lateness of the hour, and she had accepted the fact without questioning; but in truth she was so utterly wretched, that the lateness was of small moment to her. She was much given

at all times to trim her midnight lamp in solitude, and in consequence sleep had become rather a rare visitant to her, beguiling her only by fits and starts. She never complained to any one of her wakefulness ; she bore it quietly, as she did most other ills that befell her. Lately the shadow of a fresh trouble had oppressed her, and was making her nights dreary ; in spite of her efforts she had not been able to shake it off, but it never occurred to her to seek relief by imparting her fears. And so her burden had grown heavier day by day, and the strain on her harassed nerves had been aggravated by want of sleep and mental distress.

Nor was it a mere shadowy foreboding of evil that was robbing her cheek of its bloom, and depriving her of flesh. The thing, whatever it might be, was assuming tangible shape and reality. In the daytime she would rate herself for her cowardice, and would succeed in regarding it as purely imaginary, as altogether baseless and puerile. But at night she had no such relief ; she would cower away from it with a real terror and a real belief, that made her nights dreadful to her. Then it almost seemed to her as though she must make her sister her confidant. But when the morning came she shrunk from the avowal of her weakness ; all the more that she saw that in spite of her sister's solicitude she noticed nothing.



But to-night her oppression was such that she could make no pretence of sleeping. Mary had been kind and had striven to say a word of comfort, looking upon her affliction as one that words might have some power to alleviate, and she had repulsed her with a decision that had somewhat of abruptness in it. But how could Mary know that she was too sore for such words?

Even her interview with her lover had brought her no consolation; it had been brief and unsatisfactory.

"Well, Belle," he had said directly they were left alone, and putting his two hands on her shoulders, "I shall have to come to you for sympathy. I wonder what you will say to comfort me?" And then she had looked up at him rather pitifully, and had made no sort of answer.

"Things have come to a sorry pass with us," he went on. "It is all very well for Austin to joke, but I look upon our game as a lost one." Then again that long shiver had passed over her frame, thrilling her like ice, but no words of comfort had occurred to her.

"Austin did not mean to be unsympathetic," she ventured, at last.


"No, I know he did not, nor Mary either, but it is very galling to a man in my position." And then he had gone on to say a few things

decidedly bitter about his brother, and Belle had not dared to contradict him; and after that he had spoken a sentence or two as though he had felt himself assured of her sympathy.

"I wish I did know how to comfort you, Robert," she said, and her tone had been very soft and pleasant to him; "but it seems beyond my power."

"Yes, it is beyond your power, Belle; I don't think any one on earth can make my position endurable to me now." Then he had taken down his hands from her shoulders, and had bidden her good night.

It was this last speech of his that had tormented her; she was revolving it now, as she looked out at the sea-bound horizon; she had borne a great deal for his sake: the three years of her engagement had not been, on the whole, happy years—she had had her secret burdens, her sorrows, and her regrets; but, had they been doubled, she could never have brought herself to have told him that her position was unendurable, and yet it was owing to her that such was the case with him. It was not that he was unkind, for even then he had said a lover-like word or two, that at another time must have given her comfort; but he was proving to her as plainly as words could prove it that she was failing in yielding him happiness. If it were so—if his position were indeed unendurable, and the



thralldom of this hopeless engagement were fretting him, might it not be her duty—seeing that she loved him better than herself—to set him at liberty ; at least, might she not clearly make him understand that she was so willing ?

True, he might be angry with her, and refuse to take her at her word ; indeed, she rather suspected that such would be the case. But would it not be as well to brave his anger, so that she did her duty ? She did not suppose that he would misunderstand her ; undemonstrative and silent as she was, she had given him plain proofs that she loved him, though even he had no idea of the extent of her powers of loving. Already she yielded him loyal obedience in all things that concerned herself and him ; for his sake she had renounced a project she had secretly cherished for securing her own independence, and, at his expressed wish, consented reluctantly to be a burthen on her brother-in-law.

Yes, and without a dissenting word, though neither her reason nor her conscience was satisfied by his arguments ; she knew that his pride could not brook his future wife being a daily governess, and so, though she owned to herself that such pride was paltry and misplaced, and though she knew the occupation would have suited her and diverted her mind, she said nothing of the sacrifice, and was content to take up her position under her brother-in-law's roof until



such time as he should be pleased to remove her.

Nor was this the only instance in which she had moulded her will to his; and so Robert had no conception of the courage and strength which lay beneath her quiet manners. It was not that he intended to domineer, but he grew so accustomed to her yielding that he forgot at last to question her opinion; had he been able to marry her during the first months of their engagement, he would have made her a model husband, but his was a nature that grew harsh with opposition; no wonder, as Mr. Ord said, that he tried her a little.

But, after all, there was nothing abject in Belle's submission—no placing the neck in the dust, after the fashion of some women; it was rather the yielding of a strong proud will to a stronger and a prouder one, and that out of pure love. There were times when Belle could almost have prayed to have loved Robert Ord less, that his troubles should not have so darkened her life to the exclusion of her own, but she never told him so.

And now she was meditating how she could doom herself to utter misery in order to deliver him from a position that he found unbearable; and, as she did so, she could not shut her eyes to the fact that she had been a curse to him rather than a blessing; if he had not seen her—

if she had not made him love her—and her conscience could not acquit her of a thousand woman-like ways in which she had, as it were, forced him to love her; if she had gone altogether out of his way, or told him one of those white lies with which women sometimes perjure themselves and profess no repentance—if—how many of those maddening little “ifs” she could use. Ah, but for her, might he not now have been rich and happy, with a whole world of blooming faces to screen her pale one from his view.


Well, it was no good looking back: she would give him this one chance, and risk his anger, though it was the only thing on earth she dreaded; she would tell him, if he would give her the opportunity for such speech, that he had better give up this losing game of his, that she knew that they would never be married—that it would be far wiser for him to teach himself to look upon her as his friend; and at this point she laid her head down on the window sill in the darkness, and cried till her arms and hair were wet with her tears, till from very weariness she could cry no more. But not for that was her resolve shaken.

One thing she deliberated upon long, as she dragged herself to her bed, feeling conscious at last of her cramped, aching limbs—should she tell him of the haunting fear that had lately beset her and robbed her cup of its small portion of sweetness? She turned this over long in her

mind, but at last she resolved that she would not tell him. Unselfish herself, she was keenly alive to the generosity of Robert's real nature; such telling, she thought, would undo at once all the purpose of her words, and so with the asceticism which was in reality as much a part of hers as of Garton's nature, she replaced her moral hair shirt. It would be discovered some day, she knew, and then he would thank her for her reticence. Like many another fond enthusiast, it never struck her that Robert might perhaps hold a different opinion.

Her first waking thoughts were very sad; she was physically exhausted too from her lengthened vigil. For a few minutes she hesitated whether she might abstain from appearing at the family meal, but she had never excused herself yet on plea of illness, disliking all fuss and softness, and she would not spare herself now. Once or twice her strength failed her in the process of dressing, but she made head at last against her weakness, and was in her place by the time the Vicar had returned from service.

She had a little difficulty in eluding Mary's inquiries as to her rest last night, and was very short with Arty when he told her she had black spectacles round her eyes; but after breakfast, she went out to her district, and got through her duties in a mechanical sort of way, and came home at dinner-time feeling as though her feet were



weighted with lead, and with no voice ; but nevertheless she was down at the school all the afternoon. She was always very zealous in performing her duties, and took a great deal of her sister's work on her shoulders ; but, in spite of her patience and gentleness with them, the poor people liked Mary's cheerful face best.

But all the time she was looking at the girls' long seams, or setting them their tasks, she was thinking how she could best contrive to see Robert alone ; she must stay away from the evening service again she thought ; at such times Robert would often be busy gardening. Mary sometimes stayed away too, to finish her work or mind Arty ; she could easily tell her sister that she wanted a word alone with him. Robert always managed these things in an offhand manner ; she had seen him turn all the boys out of the room if he had anything particular to say to her ; perhaps she might not find it difficult after all. Robert would probably be busy gardening, and she could go out and speak to him. Anyhow, she was determined that she would not let him go till she had so spoken to him.

As they sat down to tea she did manage to say a word to him, but he noticed that her voice trembled.

" You have been tiring yourself down at the school again," he said, rebukingly ; and she had

hastened to assure him that such was not the case.

"At any rate you are right to stay at home. I think Mary and you have quite enough to do without attending all Austin's services." By which it may be seen that the Vicar's innovations were not altogether pleasing to his brother.

"I am thinking of making Belle my assistant organist again," observed Austin, who had overheard the heretical speech: "Lambert is going away on sick leave."

"I shall be very glad to help you, Austin," returned Belle, pleasantly; "I managed it very well before."

"Yes, but you won't be able to play the truant for two evenings then, remember." And then Belle knew that the Vicar was aware of her little shortcomings.

Mary was still hard at work upon Arty's old suit, and she looked up rather imploringly as Belle went to fetch her hat. Belle noticed the look in a moment.

"I am sorry that I cannot stay to help you this evening, Mary; but I am going out with Robert."

"With Robert! Why you have been out all day!" And Mrs. Ord's tone was slightly aggrieved.

"Yes, but only in the district and at the

school. I have been working with the girls all the afternoon."

"I had ten times rather you had helped me with all this work. I don't see how I am to finish it by Sunday. It is quite dreadful to see how I stay away from church now."

"Never mind; Austin wont scold you: he reserves his rebukes for me."

"I suppose he thinks that it will never do to encourage Robert in his dislike to week-day services."

"Do I encourage him, Mary?"

"Of course not. How you take me up, Belle!" and Mrs. Ord looked for once decidedly ruffled. "I think I should have asked you anyhow to have remained at home to-night; but if you are going out with Robert, of course it does not matter." But Belle, as she went out, looked as though it mattered very much indeed.

She found Robert walking up and down the Vicarage lawn, rather impatient at her delay.

"I thought you had changed your mind, and were not coming," he said, when she had got up to him.

"Oh, that was not likely."

"Nothing would be more likely with some women. What kept you?"

"Mary; she was in a fuss over the surplices, and wanted me to help her. I am afraid

she has a headache coming on; nothing else ever seems to put her out."

"I don't think I feel much in the humour for a walk, after all, Belle. I was up at five, digging with Garton, and I am as stiff as possible this evening."

"If you are tired we will certainly not go."

"You are sure you do not mind remaining in the garden?"

"Why should I mind it, Robert?"

Then she put her hand on his arm and walked slowly on.

"Austin went with me to Thornborough this morning," he began, for Belle had relapsed into silence. "It was his day at the Cottage Hospital. We had a long talk together."

"Well?"

"He was very kind."

"I am glad of it, Robert."

"He reserves all that joking manner of his for public. I don't think we ever understood each other so well as we did this morning. I am sure I ought to feel very much obliged to him for his kindness."

"I told you that he meant to be kind."

"Yes, but his manners mislead one so. Of course I held my own opinion, and of course he twitted me with my obstinacy; but I can see what he thinks about it."

"Do you mean about Miss Maturin?"

"Yes; he has just as strong a prejudice against her as any of us, only he does not mean us to see it. Austin ought to have been a lawyer, he is so chary of committing himself."

"Please don't let us talk about Miss Maturin to-night, Robert."

"What! you are getting tired of the subject already? Oh, by-the-bye, you wanted to speak to me about something, Belle."

"Yes, I did want to speak to you;" and then for a moment her voice literally failed her.

"Well, let me hear it," he replied, impatiently. "I hate mysteries. I suppose you and Mary have been putting your heads together over all this business, and have come to some impossible result."

"Mary has nothing at all to do with it."

"Well, that is right. I would rather have your own words and your own ideas than a hundred women's." And in spite of her soreness the little compliment soothed her.

"I never care somehow for Mary to talk to me about our difficulties; but I know that both she and Austin look upon our engagement as pretty nearly hopeless."

"That is our affair, Belle."

"Yes, it is our affair, but it is very hard nevertheless to have other people always dis-



cussing it. One is never left alone in this world. They say it is well to belong to a large family ; but I think it has its trials."

"Well, I don't know ; few people are so unsociable as you, Belle ;" and then he smiled at her as though her unsociability were a beauty in his eyes. There was something specially soft in his manner to her this evening ; no wonder she found it difficult to go on.

"One gets to believe what is constantly affirmed," she continued, after a pause. "Mary and Austin too are continually letting fall some word which shows what they think about it ; and, Robert, you said yourself yesterday that the chances were all against us."

"Of course they are against us."

"Yes, and then you went on to say that your position was unendurable."

"I don't think I quite made use of that term, Belle."

"Yes, you did : you said that it was quite beyond my power to comfort you ; and then you added that no one on earth could make your position endurable."

"What makes you remember my words so correctly ?" he asked ; but he had the grace to look a little ashamed of himself.

"They were not words that I could well forget, Robert ; I know I tried, but they would keep recurring to me. I was awake all night

thinking about them—and—and some other things.”

“That was very childish of you. No wonder Arty said you had black spectacles on;”—a speech which the Vicar had duly reported, as he did most speeches of his youngest born;—“you might have known that I was not accountable for my words last night.”

“I quite understand that, Robert.”

“Then I think it was very childish of you. What were the other things? Come, I mean to hear them all.”

Poor Belle! He was certainly making her task a hard one.

“I don’t think you were particularly consolatory yourself last night: if you are going to reproach me in this way, it is only fair that I should tell you that,” he observed, while she was considering how she could best bring it out; but to this she made no response.

“Come, Belle, you are making me believe it is something very important.”

“And so it is—very, very important Robert. I think it is of the utmost consequence that you should not waste your life, as you are wasting it—that you should not remain any longer in a position that you feel to be unendurable.”

“Now, Belle, I did not think it was in your nature to nag——”

“Robert!”

"Well, is it not nagging to be for ever repeating one word over and over again? I would sooner do my penance and have it well over—if you will only let me know what penance I have to perform."

Then she took her hand from his arm and walked on in silence; but as he was about to replace it he saw that she was very pale, and that her eyes were full of tears.

"Why, Belle! What is it? You are never angry with me in earnest?" And then, as he saw that she scarcely knew how to support herself, he made her pass through the open window into the Mother's room, which was always deserted at this time, and put her in the Vicar's big arm-chair. "Belle," he said, taking her hand as he stood before her, "I insist on knowing what all this is about!" And as she brushed her tears away, "I see I must be careful of my words in future; but I never knew you to be fanciful before. I certainly do not wish to rob you of your night's rest again."

"Oh, Robert! it was not only that."

"Well, what was it then? I was always glad that you were one of the quiet sort, Belle; but I am not so sure just now that it is a virtue."

"I did not mean to be so foolish."

"Oh, you need not mind about your crying, if that is what you mean. I won't be hard upon

you for that ; but I wish you would not try my patience."

"No, I will not. Robert, you must forgive me ; but I am not quite myself to-night. I want you to understand that I love you well enough to give you up if it be for your happiness."

Then he looked at her too much astonished to speak.

"Indeed I mean it. I have been thinking all night over what I had to say to you, and I have made up my mind that it was my duty to speak. Of course it is very difficult—of course you will misunderstand me ; but still I feel bound to tell you that if you wish it, I will set you free."

"But why should you set me free?" And his tone was very loud and angry as he asked her the question.

"Because, as I said before, you are wasting your life and wearing your heart out with this hopeless engagement. Every one owns it is hopeless—Mary and Austin. Why, you said yourself last night that we should never be married."

"Did I say a word about giving you up?"

"No, of course not ; but still it is my duty to give you the opportunity. Long engagements don't matter to women. Some would wait ten or fifteen years for the man they love ; but I think it is otherwise with men. I cannot

bear the thought that I should spoil your life, Robert—that all your best years should be spent in this tedious waiting. If you were free and unfettered you would go away from here, and perhaps make a fortune for yourself.”

“Have I ever coveted a fortune except for your sake, Belle?”

“No; but I cannot forget that I have robbed you of one. I am just as much to blame in that as Miss Maturin, though we are so bitter against her.”

“Pshaw!”

“Yes, indeed I am. All last night I was accusing myself and calling myself your curse. I don’t think it will ever be in my power to make you quite happy, Robert. In spite of my love, Mary is always telling me that I fail in cheerfulness.”


“I wish you were more like Mary.”

“Of course, I know she is superior to me in everything.”

“Oh, it is not that. I used to think that she was not fit to hold a candle to you, but I am not so sure of my opinion now. At any rate, I cannot fancy Mary telling Austin what you have told me.”

“Oh, Robert! You must not say that!”

“No, indeed! Fancy her separating herself from Austin in his trouble, and offering to set him free. Why, the thing would be impossible.



I don't think it ever came into her head to imagine that he could do without her. I declare I am beginning to envy Austin such a wife."

"Robert, I don't think you ought to be so angry with me."

"Well, perhaps not. I ought not to have expected that you would have put up with me so long. Mary has often told me she wonders at your patience. I am very trying, I know; but still I did not think that you would come and offer to set me free like this."

"It is because I love you better than myself," she returned, in a choked voice; but he hardly heard her in his wrath.

"And to say it so quietly, too. But then you had a whole night in which to plan your speech." And then, as she looked up at him with her face full of reproachful misery, he checked himself; for, as we have before said, Robert Ord was in spite of his faults really gentle at heart.

"Why, Bella," he said, putting his arm round her, "whatever is the matter with you to-night? You are not a bit like my own Bella." And as he said this he compelled her, as it were, to support herself against him, and truly she was in sore need of such support by this time.

"I do not know myself," she returned, now speaking through her tears. "I have been trying all day and all night to force myself

to say all this, but I cannot bear your being so angry with me."

"Then I will promise not to be so angry again; but you must never repeat your offence." And his tone was a little triumphant, as though the sense of his power over her were sweet to him. "Of course I shall never give you up. I wonder what you would have done without me, Bella, if I had taken you at your word?"

"I never thought of myself at all in it. What seemed to me of most consequence was that your life should not be wasted."

"And so you were willing to be sacrificed. I always said that you were too ready to make yourself a martyr. Some women carry about with them a flavour of the stake and the faggots. I don't think men are quite so lamb-like."

"But, Robert, I thought you knew I would do anything for your sake."

"I have had such a notion, certainly. But all the same I should dislike to see you tie yourself to the stake. I am quite sure you would crumble into ashes with becoming fortitude, but I would never be the consenting party to such a sacrifice."

"I can't think how you can care for such a poor thing as I am, Bertie."

"Well, it is strange, certainly; but don't think I am going to make any lover-like

speeches to-night. You don't deserve them. I wonder if every evening when I come home oppressed and out of spirits, that you will offer to set me free?"

"I will never offer it again." But as she said this, and pressed closer to him, feeling how dear he was to her, it suddenly came into her mind that she had not been thoroughly honest with him—that at any rate she had kept a part back. Last night she had worried herself to death, doubting whether she should tell him of her trouble, and had come at last to the conclusion that she was weak and nervous, and that possibly there was no foundation for her fears. He would only laugh at them, as she did herself sometimes; but now as the thought recurred to her, she felt as though she were hardly honest.

"I shall never offer it again," she repeated. "Your anger has been too dreadful to me. But all the same it may come to pass that you may wish you had accepted it."

"I shall never wish that," he returned, decidedly. "I would rather wait ten years for you, than six months for another woman." And as he said this, and she felt the strength and vigour of his arm, the shadow of the nameless evil passed from her, and she felt for the time almost happy.



## CHAPTER IX.

## NETTIE UNDERWOOD.

"Women, so amiable in themselves, are never so amiable as when they are useful ; and as for beauty, though men may fall in love with girls at play, there is nothing to make them stand to their love, like seeing them at work."—ABBETT.

At this time there was a young lady dwelling in the parish of Kirkby, who went by the name of Nettie Underwood.

I say "went by that name," because there was a certain entry in the baptismal register of St. Barnabas, the old parish church of Blackscar, to the effect that one Eliza Ann Underwood was duly christened on a particular day one November, about a quarter of a century before the date of our present story.

Now, as every one knows, there is nothing specially euphonious about such a name—to most ears, indeed, it is offensively the reverse. There is something painfully genteel and therefore wholly plebeian about it. It may be asked with some fair show of reason, "What's in a name?" And yet one may object to go through life branded as Eliza Ann. There is no law to prevent people from exchanging a

hideous name for one less lacerating. But many are slow to achieve such successes ; therefore when Eliza Ann Underwood, on leaving boarding-school, turned her back upon the register of St. Barnabas, and eschewing the bondage of fashion, had her cards printed as plain Nettie Underwood, it was thought by some to be too daring an experiment, and she lost three female friends on the spot.

But Nettie Underwood, being a young person of great courage, did not waste much time in mourning over one such small defeat. The loss of three bosom companions would certainly have harassed most girls, but it did not disturb Nettie's equanimity for a moment. She was always performing unexpected actions, and shocking the nerves of the female population of Blackscar and Kirkby. She had already obtained a reputation for doing extraordinary things, though no one exactly knew what they were ; such reputations are very easily acquired, and scarcely need much trouble to keep up. But whether appreciated or not, the Nettie Underwoods of society furnish a sweetness of gossip which makes them invaluable in a small place such as Kirkby, where every one knows his or her neighbour's business better than their own.

But in spite of one or two failings, a dreadful love of gossip, and a knack of doing odd things

at odd times, Nettie was a good little girl. She thought a great deal of herself, as most small persons do, and some people were far too ready to take her at her own estimate. But indeed Dame Nature had endowed her with not a few of her good gifts, though she had counter-balanced them with an equal number of defects. Thus, though she had red cheeks, a saucy little *nez retroussé*, and a pair of bright eyes; these beauties were marred to a certain extent by a wide mouth, and a square solidity of figure, which no French dressmaker, however great an artiste she might be, could ever fashion into any degree of elegance.

Nettie lived with her aunt, also Eliza Ann Underwood, spinster, in a little low-windowed house, fronting the church and hardly a stone's throw from the schools just round the corner. The house, which was very small but pleasant-looking, adjoined a still smaller shop, where they sold carvings, hymn-books, and other ecclesiastical matters, together with stonemasonry. The sexton kept this shop. From the upper bow-window, which was Nettie's drawing-room, the view was over the lich-gate and the churchyard. No wonder, as the old lady was much given to remark, they were always reminded of their end.

Miss Underwood the elder was rather a masculine-looking lady. She wore a brown front, had a moustache, and more than an indi-


cation of beard, and talked in a loud, deep voice. She was the sort of woman who would grasp your hand till you were fain to cry out with pain ; who was very loud and decided at all maternity and clothing meetings, and learned in respect of school tea-drinkings—a big, hearty woman, who called very young men by their Christian names, and patted them on the shoulder, and whom strangers feared to contradict, but who was perfectly lamblike and docile to her own niece.

People wondered how Aunt Eliza could be domineered over by a chit like Nettie, but presently the truth leaked out. The little bow-windowed house in reality belonged to Miss Underwood the younger, and not only that but a good substantial six hundred a year besides, received in half-yearly dividends. Miss Underwood was only a pensioner on her niece's bounty, and wore handsome silk dresses on sufferance. Nettie could do odd things with impunity now, and not one of her three-and-twenty intimate friends would have deserted her. All the scandal of Kirkby and Blackscar was talked round Nettie's cosy little tea-table, which was the rallying-place for all the spinsters of the neighbourhood.

Nettie was not without her ambition. She would have agreed with Cæsar that it was better "to be first in a village than second in Rome ;"

and as Bryn was without its representative, she was in some degree the leading lady in the parish. Mrs. Blake, the widow of Colonel Blake, was *par excellence* the lady of the place—the Vicar's wife excluded. But she was of a retiring nature, and disposed to plead bad health and many troubles as excuses for so retiring. Then there was Miss Brookes, who was first cousin to a baronet, and who led the van of all the spinsterhood of Kirkby. She was an irascible sort of person, with a high Roman nose, and her irascibility was such that it was not always easy for Nettie to rout her on every occasion. It is very nice certainly to be first cousin to a baronet, and there is something to be said in favour of a Roman nose. But I am disposed to think Nettie's energy and good nature were better for every-day use, even though her name was plebeian and her *nez retroussé*.

The Vicar was often heard to declare with much inward groanings of spirit, that the female, or rather the unmarried portion of his congregation, were wont to give him most trouble. On the last Harvest Festival, as we have seen, he had been much exercised in spirit. The Misses Travers had been thorns in his side, and thorns of forty years' growth are apt to be prickly. In his masculine ignorance he had chosen the most skilful hands for the nicest work, and what aspiring spinster will bear that? Miss Brookes'



feebleness and irascibility had caused her to be put aside altogether, and Mrs. Blake's good works had been wholly vicarious, but nevertheless the Vicar had had much soreness mixed up with his Harvest Thanksgiving, and even Mrs. Blake's prickly pears and hothouse grapes had given him no pleasure.

But whomsoever he blamed, he certainly exonerated Nettie Underwood; in spite of her follies and affectations, the little girl was somewhat of a favourite with our Vicar. If he had had the management the prettiest pieces of work should have fallen to her share, but Garton and Belle were not always so gracious. He always bore most good-humouredly with her chattering, though when he had had enough of it he would silence her with a word. Through his instrumentality she had become almost domesticated in the Vicarage, where she was perpetually "buz-zing in and out," as Mary called it.

When Nettie had nothing better to do, she would drop in for a moment and stop for hours. Mary, who did not altogether share her husband's partiality, and who secretly felt these morning visits unnecessary inflictions on her time and patience, was wont to remonstrate gently with her better half.

"Austin, I wish you would not encourage Nettie in such idleness," she would say when her nerves had been severely tried by a whole morn-

ing of dawdling and gossip. "She used to be rather nice, but since you have taken so much notice of her she is getting perfectly spoiled."


"Well, I don't know," the Vicar would answer, slowly. "After all, Mary, Nettie is a good little girl."

"So she may be, but that is no reason why the Vicarage should be a refuge for all the good little girls of the parish; we might as well have Lydia Beckworth, or Miss Brand, or Kitty Merton continually running in and out, as far as that goes; they are all good little girls enough, and Lydia particularly would be of some use to me."

"There is no reason why you should not have Miss Beckworth if you wish it, my dear;" but the Vicar made a wry face, for Lydia Beckworth was one of his special thorns. "I certainly have no wish to dictate on the choice of your friends."

"That means that you do not admire poor Lydia. Well, neither do I, but I have always found her very good-natured; she would not see me, for instance, with all this pile of mending beside me and never offer to do a stitch, as Nettie has been doing all this morning."

"Perhaps she had forgotten her thimble," suggested the Vicar, charitably; he was well used to these thrusts at his favourite. "Of course that is always her excuse, but it is my private opinion that she could not darn a sock if she tried." Then the Vicar smiled as he took



his paper and went out on the lawn. He was well aware of Nettie's misdemeanors and little failings; he used to store them up in his memory and tell her of them in his own way. Nettie would tingle down to her fingers' ends at some well-merited rebuke, uttered half in pleasantry; at such times her feelings for the Vicar were not unmingled with awe, but in general they were the best of friends.

Nettie's visits had been more than usually trying to Mrs. Ord of late. She was in constant dread that Nettie would question her about the new owner of Bryn. "If she get hold of all this business about Miss Maturin she may make it terribly unpleasant for us all," she said once to her husband."

"Don't let her get hold of it," was his only answer.

"Oh, but, Austin, we shall not be able to help it; you don't half know how curious Nettie is; she will ask questions and worm everything out. It is all very well for you to keep her at a distance, she is in wholesome dread of you as her spiritual pastor and master, but it will not be quite so easy for us."

"Very well, then, I will give Garton a hint to keep his tongue quiet."

"And then she will come to me."

"I hope you will refuse to answer her questions, Mary. Nettie is a good little girl, but of



course she has her weak points, and love of gossip is one of them; it does not matter to me personally how much is known or not known, but I think we owe it to Robert to be cautious."


"Yes, and Robert is always so hard upon Nettie."

"That is because she is such a chatterbox. Well, we must all do the best we can; but of course the truth will leak out by degrees. People will soon find out that we have no friendly relations with Bryn."

"We are certainly in a most painful position," sighed Mary, who had felt herself much oppressed during the last few days at the prospect of her new neighbour; "what makes it doubly trying for us is, that the clergyman's family is always expected to show kindness to strangers."

"The clergyman—but not his family, my dear, if the stranger prove a doubtful one; and then for every cup of cold water there will be Robert's wrath to face. Yes, we are not in an enviable position; the difficulty is to decide between such conflicting duties, and to be sure we are judging and not misjudging—if one were not so prejudiced to begin with. Heigho! Polly, it is a contradictory sort of world." And then Belle entered the room, and the conversation dropped.

Mary's prediction about Nettie's curiosity and love of gossip was soon to be verified. The very next morning, as the Vicar and his brother



were doing some hard digging among the strawberry beds, they heard the well-known click of the lock proceeding from the green door in the wall.

"Here's Nettie Underwood, again," exclaimed Garton, as he rested his foot on the spade a moment. "I declare that girl lives here; she bores Mary terribly."

"Mary cannot understand why idle people are suffered to live at all," observed the Vicar, with grim humour, as Nettie came up to them rustling in her crisp muslins and looking wonderfully fresh and bright; it was Garton's standing joke that Nettie always crackled as she walked. She was fond of starched cambrics and muslins, and was very great in ruffles and frills. In this she differed from Belle, who loved all soft and clinging materials. Nettie decked her little person with bright-coloured ribbons, a bow here and a bow there; she wore toy aprons, and little high-heeled shoes, that creaked with newness. Garton in his satire sometimes called her the "Dresden Shepherdess," though he generally added, under his breath, that she was rather too Dutch-built for Arcadia and would require a substantial crook.

"Mrs. Ord is always finding fault with my idleness," returned Nettie, pouting, as the Vicar threw aside another shovelful of earth. "I don't think it is any merit for people who like work to be industrious. I am sure you are

handling that spade with as much delight as I should a croquet mallet."

"Perhaps so, Miss Nettie; but I don't think Mary is quite so fond of mending as I am of digging."

"Don't you think she is, Mr. Ord?" very incredulously.

"Well, I don't know; you ought to be a better judge than I am. I observe she frowns dreadfully when she sews on buttons."

"Why are buttons always coming off, I wonder?" asked Nettie, innocently.

"To give occupation to idle young ladies, I suppose. By-the-bye, Miss Nettie, I hope you have your thimble with you this morning."

"I—I have left it at home," returned Nettie, much discomposed at this unexpected attack.

"Left it at home! Dear me! Thimbles are not very heavy to carry, are they? and Mary wants you to help her this morning. Never mind, I daresay Belle's will fit you."

"I don't think I shall have time to sit with Mrs. Ord this morning. Aunt Eliza wants me." And as Nettie uttered this fib, she glanced uneasily at Mary's work-basket in the distance.

"Oh, indeed; then I suppose your visit is to Garton and me? Gar, you uncivil fellow, why don't you say something entertaining to our visitor?"

"Of course I shall go in to Mrs. Ord directly;

"I am going now." And Nettie turned very red as she detected the slight vein of irony in the Vicar's speech. "I only came up for a moment to see if she and you had heard the news; but as you are so busy"—and so disagreeable she was going to add—"I won't interrupt you." And so saying, she rustled off, rather piqued by the coolness of her reception.

"So ho, my little lady! that is why you have come; and Mary is right, as usual," muttered the Vicar; and his lip curled with an amused smile, as he fell to his work with an energy that surprised his brother.

"There, I have finished my bit of ground, Garton," he said, looking admiringly at the result of his labours; "and my arms are pretty stiff by this time, I can tell you. Don't forget we have a funeral at a quarter to twelve, and there is no one to toll the bell. Now I must go in; for Nettie is up to mischief, and I must settle her, and then I have some letters to write."

Nettie's tongue was in full swing as he approached the window, and Mary's face looked sorely perplexed. She seemed quite relieved at the sight of her husband.

"Austin, do come here a moment," for the Vicar was feigning to pass the window; "is it not strange, Nettie has heard all about Bryn?"

"Well, I don't see anything strange about that, Mary. I suppose Hannah Farebrothers will tell everybody that she is expecting a new mistress. She was brimful of it to me ten days ago, and so was Peter. I think they were rather disappointed at my want of interest."

"Do you mean that you were not really interested, Mr. Ord?" exclaimed Nettie. She had forgotten her pique already in her eagerness. "Why, it seems such a wonderful event to us all at Kirkby."

"Little things please little minds, Miss Nettie."

"Yes, but this is not a little thing; the owner of Bryn will take a leading influence in the parish."

"Mary suggested that she might be a Plymouth Sister," observed the Vicar, slyly.

"A Plymouth Sister?" returned Nettie, opening her eyes rather widely. "Oh, that must have been Mrs. Ord's nonsense. Of course, she must be a Churchwoman."

"I don't see any of course, Miss Nettie."

"But the Plymouth Sisters have everything in common, have they not—wear each other's gowns, and say their prayers in whitewashed rooms? No, I don't think the owner of Bryn is likely to be that."

"You see that was only a theory of Mary's. Mary is rather clever at such things. You

have a theory yourself about work, have you not?"

"Hannah Farebrothers told me," interposed Nettie, hurriedly, "that the young lady had come quite unexpectedly into this fortune. The story was quite a romantic one. She had been a governess, and then a companion, and all at once she woke up one morning and found herself an heiress."

"That is very romantic indeed. I never knew that you were such friends with Mrs. Farebrothers."

"One of our servants knows her—and—and Harriet is a great talker——" And Nettie broke off at this point, rather confused.

"Most servants are talkers," returned the Vicar, quietly; "I suppose she found a good listener. Ah, well! Hannah Farebrothers is a sad gossip, as Miss Maturin will find to her cost."

"Isn't Miss Maturin a strange name?—Rotha Maturin—it sounds nice somehow. I suppose you will leave your card within the week, Mrs. Ord?"

"I? I don't know. I have not made up my mind," stammered Mary; but her husband came to her assistance.

"What do you mean to do, Miss Nettie? That is more to the purpose."

"Of course I shall wait till the Vicar's wife

sets us the example," returned Nettie, sententially. "Aunt Eliza says the clergyman's family always call first."

"Mary, did you hear that? I hope you will make a memorandum of Aunt Eliza's advice. Miss Underwood ought to understand the proper etiquette in such cases. The clergyman's family always call first."

"Did you not know that before?" asked Nettie, very much puzzled.

"My dear Miss Nettie, you cannot expect us to be all Aunt Elizas. What can a poor country parson know about fashion and etiquette? I suppose Mary ought to send a roundrobin through the parish, stating the exact day on which she leaves her card. If so, I had better have a form printed at once."

"Mr. Ord, I do believe you are laughing at me."

"Laughing? Not at all! It is quite pleasant to hear a little gossip for a change. One does not often have the opportunity of hearing a good racy servant's tale. Mary has a prejudice against them—that is another of her theories. Have you tried on Belle's thimble yet, Miss Nettie?"

"I see clearly that you are trying to tease me," said Nettie, looking very much injured. "I don't see why I am to be scolded and laughed at because I choose to be idle, and because I have brought you a piece of news, and

I did so want to know if it were true," she continued, piteously.

"Which? the idleness or the news?"

"Oh, Mr. Ord, it is no good trying to get anything out of you."

"Try Mary, then."

"No; she will not answer me either. I only wanted to know if it were true that Miss Maturin had been a companion, and whether you meant to forget bygones, and call upon her as you would on any ordinary newcomer; because, of course, it was not her fault, poor thing! as Mrs. Farebrothers says——" And here Nettie stopped, confused under the Vicar's eye.

"What did Hannah Farebrothers say was not her fault?" he demanded, quickly.

"That the property came to her, and not to Mr. Robert; and she was hoping that he would not bear malice, and—and——"

"Really, Mrs. Farebrothers seems a very interfering woman," said the Vicar, now really displeased. "I shall take care to inform Miss Maturin what sort of person she has in her service. She was not so presuming in my aunt's time, but I suppose she has been too long her own mistress. Well, as Hannah Farebrothers' tales never had any interest for me, I may as well betake myself to my letters: it is only idle people who can afford to gossip."

Then Nettie got up and shook out her



ruffles, looking very much as though she had got the worst of it, and said some meaningless little word or two to Mary about Aunt Eliza expecting her.

"What! are you going too?" said the Vicar, holding out his hand with a relenting smile. "Well, good-bye; give my kind regards to Miss Underwood, and tell her I shall hope to meet her this afternoon at the district meeting. We are always very glad to see you at the Vicarage, Miss Nettie; but next time you come I hope you will not forget your thimble."

## CHAPTER X.

## ROTHA.

"I will not shut me from my kind,  
 And lest I stiffen into stone,  
 I will not eat my heart alone,  
 Nor feed with sighs a passing wind.

"I'll rather take what fruit may be  
 Of sorrow under human skies,  
 'Tis held that sorrow makes us wise,  
 Whatever wisdom sleeps with thee."

IN MEMORIAM.

ROTHA MATURIN spent some three weeks under the lawyer's hospitable roof, and both she and her kind entertainers were unfeignedly sorry when the visit came to an end.

Mr. Tracy had become sincerely attached to his young protégée; his good opinion of her had increased rather than otherwise, and he never ceased to lament Robert Ord's unfortunate prejudice against her. His hearty sympathy did much to re-establish Rotha in her own self-esteem. She began to look upon her misfortune from a less morbid point of view; something of the old courage and spirit returned to her, and though she was still painfully subdued, and the languor of an unnatural oppression was still heavy on

her, there was a quiet vigour and self-reliance discernible now in her actions, which strangers were not slow to appreciate.

On the whole those weeks had done much for her; the very atmosphere of the house in Manchester Square was restful and pleasant to the sorely tried girl. Mr. Tracy's quaint, old-fashioned politeness—a little out of date perhaps, but perfectly kind-hearted—the good-natured chatter of his homely wife, and the prim ways of his two daughters with their old-maidish notions of the fitness of things, and their kind womanly hearts at the bottom; the endless gossips over trifles and shreds of events, the little tea-parties with the never-failing rubber of whist to follow, all the ins and outs of a quiet, old-fashioned household, interested Rotha Maturin, and soothed her at the same time.

Sore from her lifelong experience of a cold and unsympathetic world, and yearning as only a woman can yearn for the pure sweet atmosphere of home, for sympathy, for contact with congenial natures, for the bare crust of mere human kindness, no wonder if Mrs. Tracy's motherliness, and the harmless garrulity of her gentle, fussy daughters were pleasant to the lonely girl. In a few days she had roused out of the dangerous apathy that had been creeping over her ever since that unfortunate interview in Eglistone Abbey: in very gratitude she strove to interest herself in

their pursuits, in Mrs. Tracy's silk patchwork, and Miss Harriet's missionary basket, prolific of woollen jugs and gaudy striped cuffs, and even in Miss Louisa's innocent penchant for the consumptive young curate who stammered. She listened patiently while Miss Louisa, with many faded blushes, expounded a receipt for black-currant jelly which would cure any incipient pulmonary complaint. She won golden opinions from the placid women : her patchwork was a marvel of neatness, her silk stars and diamonds, miracles of needlework, and her woollen jugs the tastiest in the basket ; and though she did not actually assist in the concoction of the black-currant jelly, she was careful to taste it, and won Miss Louisa's heart for ever by her judicious praises of the useful introduction of cayenne pepper, which was secretly to work such results. And in all this there was no unnecessary and weak pandering to the fancies and whims of strangers ; it was only the readiness of a simple affectionate nature to adapt itself to the pleasure of others. It was not that Rotha Maturin cared to knit woollen jugs, or snip old pieces of brocade into grotesque shapes. It was simply that she wished to please the kind Samaritans who had taken her under their roof ; she was glad that they considered her such a capital partner at whist, and though she secretly disliked the game, she was never too busy or too tired to take a hand ; and then she was so quick

to replenish the silver snuffbox whose contents travelled so endlessly down Mr. Tracy's nankeen waistcoat. Rotha used to marvel at first at the brown stream that effected lodgments in every crease and fold ; by-and-by she got used to it—as she did to Mrs. Tracy's frilled cape, and to Miss Harriet's false front and velvet band ; it was a little odd, but then they were old-fashioned people.

Yes, those weeks had done much for Rotha Maturin ; it was a new thing for the poor pupil teacher and the still more lonely companion to be treated as though she were a person of some consideration ; in her humility she had forgotten the prestige which the world attaches to an heiress : when her opinions were listened to and treated with deference, she felt abashed and almost ashamed : she could not understand it at all. When at one of the little tea-parties she was placed in the seat of honour by Mr. Tracy himself, Rotha glanced across the table at Mrs. Tracy, with her shy bright eyes ; she thought there must have been some mistake. Presently she got used to it ; she was not even flurried when Sir George Summerson, the *ci-devant* cheesemonger and sheriff newly knighted, turned over her pages while she played. The ex-sheriff patronized Miss Maturin a good deal. He condescended to sing more than one song to her accompaniment ; he had a fine deep voice, that Stentor might have envied. Miss Louisa used

to keep cotton wool by her on the evenings he was expected, and secretly stopped her ears. He caught her at it once, and never forgave the insult. Indeed, it was supposed by her family, that but for that she would have had some chance of becoming Lady Summerson: that was a good ten years ago, and he had since married an oilman's daughter, who was a little over four feet and had a voice like a mouse. Miss Louisa never betrayed her consciousness of the honour intended for her; she went on with the cotton wool industriously. Rotha used to long for a little as she played those accompaniments:—"The Village Blacksmith," "The Standard Bearer," or "Alonzo the Brave." How he rolled his r's—it was like the rusty creaking of a gate; his d's were all t's—the clanging of iron would have been softer.


"Thank you, Miss Maturin; Mrs. S. herself couldn't have played that passage more powerful," the ex-sheriff would say as he twirled his thumbs in his buttonholes, and turned round flushed and satisfied to receive the plaudits of the company.

"What's the use of pumping out all one's breath and one's feeling alongside of it, if the pianist has no sympathy? You must knock it out of the notes, as I say to Mrs. S. And, bless you! she does her best, as the piano-tuner will tell you—when he found half the notes broken and all of a jingle, like a big Jew's-harp. People can't afford that sort of playing mostly: it comes too

expensive. But lor, you've got the proper sort of touch, Miss Maturin, and no mistake." She had put the pedals down to please him. " Loud and sweet as musical glasses. I should like Mrs. S. to hear you play. Come and pay us a visit down at Wanstead ; your cheeks wouldn't be the worse for a few roses, and Mrs. S. and the young 'uns will be blithe enough to see you."

Rotha used to decline these invitations with a shake of the head and a smile. She had a gentle sort of dignity with her that awed even the boisterous knight. It was not easy for any one to take a liberty with Miss Maturin. The man or the women who attempted it would not have liked the glance of those grave dark eyes. Neither was it always easy to be familiar with her unless she wished it. Without exactly repelling, there was a shy reserve, which was the result of circumstances, as simplicity and impulsive affection were a part of her real nature.

As with many of us, Rotha's character was a sad contradiction, for which the unhappy circumstances of her life were most to be blamed, and perhaps no one but Mrs. Carruthers really knew what Rotha's true disposition was. To most people she only seemed a grave-looking girl, with a sweet and rather melancholy voice and unnaturally quiet manners ; her little pupils had



found her even-tempered and patient with their failings; to her superiors she had always shown herself respectful and diffident to a fault; her quietness had been grievous in Mrs. Ord's eyes, and her passive endurance amounting almost to indifference, had provoked systematic contempt more and more openly avowed; and yet even she, in her cold-hearted selfishness, had become alive to the moral excellence of Rotha's nature, and had begun to cling to her as the old and failing will cling to what offers them strength and support. And patience, the very gentleness and essence of patience, was so deeply engrained in Rotha's nature. Robert Ord's words to Belle might have been quoted with equal truth of her, "She was just the stuff of which martyrs are made." There was the flavour of the stake and faggot about her, and no mistake; and yet in very honesty it must be avowed it was a neutral excellence. She bore passively what she had to bear, but she did not morbidly court or seek her sufferings. She would bear her burdens as meekly and almost as quietly as the overladen camel. It was the last touch—Robert Ord's cruel finger of scorn—that provoked that bitterness of despair. Rotha's pride, her innocent pride of integrity had been touched there; here was a burden she declared too heavy to bear, and yet all the while she was silently but surely gathering up all her courage and force of will to




make her back broad even for such burden. She could see no outlet; she had been weak, and shuddered away from it long enough, and now it had come that she must bear the deadly thing. She did not say so much to herself in words, but Mrs. Carruthers's strong sense had made itself felt, and, though her spirit still died within her, her very force of will stood her in good stead. But only her old friend Meg knew how every fibre of that strong young nature had been strained under the cold, hardening influences that had beset her early youth. Rotha's character was one that ought to have ripened in full sunshine; years before, it had shown promise of much tender blossom; there had been faint, sweet tendrils of womanly beauty, much clinging, a strong upward growing, steadfastness and nobility of purpose. The time had come for much fair fruit—for the downy ripeness and full flavoured sweetness of a perfectly rounded nature; when lo! instead of the sunshine had come the rough blasts of adversity—bitter winds had beaten upon her. A more weakly nature would have succumbed long ago under such alien pressure. Rotha was young and supple; she bent under the storm, but her very pliancy saved her. In her intervals of calm she gathered much quiet strength. Now and then she drooped in sadness, but never for long together.

But her quiet had grown to be a part of her-

self; years ago the bright high spirit had been quenched. Meg alone knew how the patient sensitive girl longed for her full measure of happiness, craved after love, appreciation, and sympathy, with the hunger and thirst of a great nature strongly roused and unnaturally starved. Rotha demanded meat, and lo! meagre crumbs were denied her; and yet she only offered herself for the lowest ministries of love. I verily believe that such as she are fellow-sufferers with Lazarus lying unfed at richer doors; and yet, what sweetness had she opposed to all Mrs. Ord's contempt and coldness—how she had clung to her from the very necessity to cling to something! Strong as she was, she could not stand alone. Was this the nature to be exposed to the baneful influences of constant suspicion and coldness? or would patience and fortitude win their way at last, "overcoming evil with good?" Who knows? Many such conflicts are even now being fought in the battle of life, and God help the right.

Rotha shed tears when she parted from her kind friends and took her place beside Mrs. Carruthers in the railway carriage. To her this was a dark day's journey. As she leant back upon the cushions and closed her eyes, a feeling almost amounting to agony took possession of her, as she thought how the fierce speed was already lessening the distance between her and

that hated home ; she felt almost like a criminal whose reprieve was drawing to an end, and who had not yet attained to the sullen indifference which is to blunt his fear. What a nightmare of oppression was on her—a blank of suspense and unreality ! She could have envied Mrs. Carruthers looking out on the prospect with such thorough appreciation of its beauties ; the green fields and flying hedges and rolls of brown uplands were nothing to her now ; sometimes they passed sweeps of pasture land scarlet with poppies, and Meg would wonder and exclaim. The whole country was gay with these flaming weeds ; they blazed on hill-tops, or dipped into knolls and valleys ; now they stood flaunting by the roadside like beggars in gay-coloured rags, and now they hung out from the stony rocks in scores and hundreds, like tattered banners streaming with blood ; now and then there was a glory and a waste of colour when the yellow sunshine flooded some distant height. Meg held her breath and checked herself when she saw Rotha's tired face ; she was almost vexed with herself that the fresh air and beautiful scenery gave her such pleasure. Rotha strove to rouse herself into something like interest when she saw this. But in spite of her own and Meg's efforts, it was a long, weary journey, and it was almost a relief when they reached Blackscar at last.



Mr. Tracy had made every possible arrangement for his young friend's comfort ; and the old factotum and house-servant, Peter, had orders to meet his new mistress at the station and escort her to her future home. Mrs. Ord's carriage and horses had followed her to London, and had been sold after her death ; for Rotha was determined that no idle pomp and ceremony should be hers. She and Mr. Tracy had already regulated the extent of the modest household. The old servants, Hannah and Peter Farebrothers, were to be kept on, and a couple of young maids under them—so much was absolutely necessary. But when Mr. Tracy proposed a phaeton or pony carriage, he was almost surprised at the haste and decision with which his proposal was negatived. It was in vain that he assured her over and over again that such a convenience was thought nothing of in the country ; that it was indispensable, respectable, and only becoming her station. Miss Maturin shook her head ; she would never ride or drive when she could walk. She could not help it if people looked down on her and called her miserable. She must learn to live without her neighbours' good opinion, she supposed. And her lips trembled and set themselves as she said this.

“ But, my dear, how will you manage to spend your money ? ” Mr. Tracy had persisted, “ with no house-rent, and handsome annuities secured

to the servants? Recollect, you owe it to your benefactress to make a good use of the wealth left you. I would rather see you squander it than hoard it up like this."

"Indeed I do not intend to hoard it up in the way you mean, dear Mr. Tracy," she answered, smiling a little, but very sadly. "I am going to live well and comfortably, and to want for nothing; but you must not ask me to spend one farthing that is not absolutely necessary."

"But why, my dear?" asked the old lawyer, now thoroughly bewildered by what he chose to consider an obstinate whim; and yet somewhat shaken by her seriousness.

"Because I am keeping it all for him. No, my dear old friend, you must not be angry with me. Of course I know how I am fettered by that unjust will. I ought to know something about wills now. I have made my own. I may never have the opportunity—of course I never shall—of giving it to him in my lifetime. But I am not very strong. Young people die sometimes. He may have it all, sooner than he thinks. Oh, Mr. Tracy, how I wish he might! how I wish he might!"

"And a very wicked wish, my dear. As though your Maker did not know what was best for you and him too. That comes of having a lot of morbid fancies in your head, and not listening to the opinions of those who are older

and wiser than yourself. It was bad enough your making that will; and very weak of me to give in to such folly when there was plenty of time. Only, of course, there was nothing to say against it; but when it comes to your wishing yourself dead because an ill-tempered young man chooses to think a lot of lies against you—there—there, we wont talk any more about it.” And Mr. Tracy pushed away his snuff-box and rubbed his head irritably.

Rotha gave one of her soft little laughs as she saw him.

“And I needn’t have the carriage?”

“Of course not. If you choose to be miserly.”

“Oh, I don’t mind being called that at all. Other people may think me stingy. I suppose Mrs. Farebrothers will. I can’t tell everybody that I am keeping it for him. But the thought that I am—that I am only a steward of her money for him will keep me brave and patient. I know it will, Mr. Tracy. And in God’s good time all this miserable mistake will be rectified.”

“There; go along with you,” finished Mr. Tracy, testily. “I am glad you are no daughter of mine.” And the lawyer helped himself to a liberal pinch of his favourite mixture. “And that fool of a fellow can’t see what a woman he is persecuting!” he muttered, as Rotha walked away. “And she has made me promise to keep her counsel, too. A steward of his

money, indeed! A conceited young stone-flint. My daughter? No! no! She is far too near the angels. Now I have it why she wears those black stuff gowns, and wouldn't look at the silk one my wife chose for her. If there is one thing I hate it is sentimental rubbish." And here Mr. Tracy shut up his snuff-box with a click that woke up his wife from her afternoon nap.

Rotha had one or two more conversations with her guardian, as she persisted in calling him—she was very ignorant on the subject of executors and trustees—but they always ended in this manner. She got plenty of scolding and grumbling, but not a few valuable hints. Among other things he advised her to make the Vicar her confidant in all matters relating to parish matters and charities.

"He is a good, sensible man, and not much stuck-up, though he is an Ord, and you may rely safely on his judgment. They say he is a rare one for making the women work, though. What's that you are saying? Not come to Bryn? Why, of course he'll come to Bryn. What's the use of a parson if he can't shirk his feelings when they interfere with his duty?"

"But if his brother poison his mind against me?" put in Rotha, timidly.

"Why, he'll come all the same. Isn't it a parson's duty to look after his flock? What's the

good of wearing a long coat, and being down on his knees half the day, as they say he is, with his open church and his daily services, and all that nonsense, if he does not know his duty better than that? If he doesn't come he ought to ; and I hope you'll send for him. I suppose you have got a soul to be saved as well as the rest of the women ; though such as yours must be safe, I should think. Poison his mind ! Fiddlestick ends ! Isn't this a free country ? Why, we should be ashamed to convict a criminal on circumstantial evidence, let alone an unoffending young woman." And Mr. Tracy breathed stormily as he dismissed the subject with a wrathful wave of the hand.

"And you think I must not ask Mrs. Farebrothers to do all the cooking?" asked Rotha, returning to the principal subject of her thoughts.

"Why, Hannah is not so young as she was ; nor Peter either. They've had a hard life of it. One can't ask old servants to slave at their age. Better have the two young women and done with it. It will make your mind easier, and do better in the long run."

"But two people don't want four servants, Mr. Tracy."

"Two people want twenty sometimes. It is no use asking my advice and then flying in the face of it. But young people will have their own opinions."



"And you really think I must not ask Mrs. Farebrothers to do more?"

"That depends on the toughness of your conscience," replied the lawyer, grimly. And Rotha, seeing the contest would be a stubborn one, and rather mistrusting her own inexperience, gave in somewhat hastily to her friend's judgment; and so one point was gained.

It was Mr. Tracy's thought that Peter should be at the station. If Rotha could have had her wish, she would have slipped into her new home after dark, like a thief; but Mr. Tracy had determined otherwise. And as the train steamed into the station there was the grey-haired old servant peering anxiously at every well-dressed lady who alighted, in the hope of recognising his unknown mistress. His countenance fell a little when Rotha quietly accosted him; the two dowdily-dressed women standing by their boxes had not once attracted Peter's notice, whose ideas of mistresses were chiefly founded on Mrs. Ord's satins and sables. The tall, thin girl in black might have passed for her own maid, only a lady's-maid would have been smarter. The quiet tone of authority, however, left him no room for doubt.

"Peter, will you help Mrs. Carruthers to count the boxes? She is at the luggage van. I suppose you have a cab for us outside? Thank you. I will wait here till you have seen to the luggage."

And a the bewildered servant obeyed his orders she leant wearily against a truck, till Mrs. Carruthers summoned her.

Blackscar and Kirkby were looking their best that evening. Such season as appertained even to Blackscar was rapidly filling the scanty measure of lodging-houses and hotels. The old-fashioned shops were dressed more gaily than usual, the jewellers especially. The carvers of jet might have hanged themselves by hundreds on the long pendants and chains of curious workmanship that decorated their shop-fronts. The endless festoons filled the lookers-on with incipient feelings of strangulation. Nobs and blocks of indigestible-looking jet resolved themselves everywhere into ear-rings and other instruments of torture. To judge from their multiplicity, every female in Blackscar might have been condemned by some fury of fashion, to carry black weights protruding from the lobes of their ears in the shape of rings, startling-looking butterflies and daisies, pinnacles and oblongs, cruciform monstrosities, and other relics of barbarism.


The haberdashers were not nearly so prolific of goods: a meagre supply of blue draperies festooned the windows of the principal dépôt of fashion, to be relieved on the morrow by a still more scanty supply of green; every day of the week had its appropriate colour, its faint pink and its dingy brown. The shell shops looked

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brighter, and drove a brisk trade with the young members of the community; but then Blackscar was a little out of date.

Still, it was looking its best this evening. There was plenty of sunshine. Some church-bells were pealing. The air was blowing freshly from the sea. An itinerant band of music had struck up. Knots of gaily-dressed people lingered on the sea-walls, or at breezy corners. Now and then, down some side street, Rotha could catch a glimpse of yellow sands—of a sea intensely blue; now and then there was a sudden sense of salt freshness, faint sea-weedy smells, a slow ripple, and a pause, and then the low musical rush of a breaking wave—some restless pulse of Rotha's heart beat more quickly when she heard that. Down past the Grammar School, and the rows of low bow-windowed houses; past the church, with its lich-gate, with the Leatham Hills, and the flickering fires smoking luridly in the distance; behind it, down past the schoolhouse and the sexton's, there were the grass hillocks and the long sandy sweep, the whole grand curve of the bay, with Welburn lying westward.

Rotha uttered a little cry of pleasure at that sight. How still and calm it all looked! What blue distances, what masses of black, uncovered rocks; how lurid those tongues of murky flame looked from those distant furnaces, and how softly the purple line of hills cut against



the sunset sky. They had passed a few white-washed cottages, and a grey-looking house or two. By-and-by, a bridge over a disused little railroad, and nearly opposite, another grey house, a little larger and more substantial than the others; beyond this were some stubble-fields, a suspicion of distant factories, a tract of barren land, intersecting railroads, sandy hillocks in profusion, with a range of rabbit-warrens below.

Rotha knew this was Bryn almost before they stopped. As she walked across the strip of green lawn she was almost relieved at the want of pretentiousness about the whole place.


Bryn was an old-fashioned two-storied house, built of greystone, which gave it a weather-beaten aspect. Just now its many cracks and stains were hidden under a wealth of greenery and climbing roses, which festooned the bay windows and crept in luxuriant confusion over the stone porch; long trails of Virginia creeper covered up the grey baldness, and made old age beautiful.

The front door stood open. Rotha had just time to catch a glimpse of a long dusty hall, with a wide shallow staircase, and glass doors opening on to a pleasant lawn, before a tall, muscular-looking woman with a shrewd, sensible face, came from behind some swing doors with a couple of raw-boned country lasses behind her.

"Now Prudence, now Emma, here's the new mistress. Come, look alive, girls! Where's your manners? I am sure, Miss Maturin, we all bid you welcome kindly to your new home," continued Mrs. Farebrothers, as she dropped one hurried curtsey after another, in dire perplexity as to which the new mistress really was. She was fixing on Mrs. Carruthers in her mind, when Miss Maturin quietly stepped forward.

"This is my friend Mrs. Carruthers, Hannah, who is to come and live with me. I am Miss Maturin. I am sure you mean to welcome us very kindly. I have heard so much of you and of Peter," continued the young girl, holding out her hand to each; "you have been such faithful servants and friends to my benefactress—I have heard her so often talk of you both—that I feel as though I know you already." And then as Hannah held her apron to her eyes, she turned round with a kind word and smile to the two shy damsels behind.

"I'll never think that silks and satins make a lady again," said Peter, when he sat down beside the hearth that evening, when all the bustle of the arrival was over. "I was thinking to myself at the station how that young-looking creature in the black stuff gown can't be our Miss Maturin—why, our Betsy was a sight smarter than her!—when she up and spoke to me. 'Peter,' says she, quite clip-like, and like a




Londoner, 'Peter,' says she, 'just look after them boxes while I stay here.' Why, you might have knocked me all of a heap all the time the porter was loading his truck. I kept saying, 'That young woman in the black gown our Miss Maturin?' over and over again, like a blockhead as I was; but law! when she put those long fingers of hers in my hand, with never a ring on them—did you mind that Hannah?—and spoke so prettily, not a bit pert or proud for all her grand fortune, I just said to myself, 'That there young woman is the right sort, after all.'"

"Yes, she is the right sort," returned Mrs. Farebrothers, thoughtfully regarding a tin she was polishing, and which was already bright enough to reflect her hard-featured Scotch face. "I am not for denying that, Peter; but all this evening I can't get it out of my mind that the poor lassie has a sore heart of it. Her eyes have too sorrowful a look in them to be quite natural to such a young creature. It made me dour to look at her."

"The other one is a widow, I've heard say," suggested Peter.

"A widow or not, she's no beauty to look at," returned Mrs. Farebrothers, with whom Meg's homely face and ways had found no favour. "If Miss Maturin wanted a dragon to keep her, she needn't have gone farther and fared worse. She is a Welshwoman by her looks, if ever I have

seen one. Well, as I was saying, Peter, I am sure there is something lying heavy on that young creature. When I had given her the keys, and said something suitable, of course, I was for showing them the house directly. She wanted to put it off a bit; but Mrs. Carruthers said, very sensible, 'Better get it over; you will feel more settled like,' says she. And so, after that she made no more ado. Well, the rooms are good rooms and handsome ones. But law! what was the use of Prue and me beeswaxing and polishing and fretting ourselves for the last three weeks. She only just looked round them in a tired sort of way, as much as to say, 'I've seen you all before; and I don't want to look at you again.' The Welshwoman kept nudging her: 'What a pretty room, Rotha,' she kept saying. 'What nice feather beds, Mrs. Farebrothers. Look here, my dear, what a view from your dressing-room window.' But, bless you, she wouldn't take the hint. But when I threw open the missis' wardrobe, and showed her that pile of yellow lace, and the plate and jewel case, 'Don't show me all that, Hannah,' she says very quick and sharp, and with a kind of shudder; 'I don't like to see it. So this is where she slept, poor thing;' and she went up to the bed and patted the pillow in such a pitiful way. 'I think she would have liked to have laid her poor head again there, Meg,' she said so soft and sad.



Well, I didn't like to hear her go on like that; so I said without thinking, 'Yes, this was her favourite room, poor lady. That one next to it was Mr. Robert's. Yes, she was that fond of him that she could not bear him to be far from her.' Bless your heart, I could have bitten my tongue out before I'd have made such a speech. She seems to be a poor, sickly-looking body at the best. But she just went that sort of colour like waxwork. 'So that was his room?' she said, with such a sigh. 'See, it was just within her own; she always treated him as though he were her own son. You are very right, Hannah, to have left it just as it was,' she went on. 'It must never be touched—never. Some day, when he comes to see it, or to hear of it, it will please him to think we have left his old room just as it was.' And as she closed the door gently, I could see her eyes were full of tears. Was it not odd, Peter, and they such strangers to each other."

"Odd? Not a bit. We shall see stranger things than that before we've done, missis. What's more natural than that a young woman, kindhearted, with not a bit of pride about her, should take on and pity the poor fellow? Of course it would be against nature not to be pleased with her fine fortune. But all the same, she won't forget them that's lost it." And Peter administered a brisk kick to the coals with an energy that made his wife jump.



"Miss Nettie says that there is some ill-blood in Mr. Robert's mind about her. She couldn't get a word out of the parson nor his wife neither. I don't think they ought to make things difficult for her because the old missis chose to leave her her money. Every one knows how badly Mr. Robert behaved; 'but the stubborn neck shall have a fall,' as Solomon says."

But how much farther Hannah would have got in her quotation was not evident, as at that moment the upstairs bell rung.

## CHAPTER XI.

## BRYN.

"I know that this was life—the track  
Whereon with equal feet we fared ;  
And then, as now, the day prepared  
The daily burden for the back."

IN MEMORIAM.

"All day within the dreamy house,  
The doors upon their hinges creak'd ;  
The blue fly sung in the pane ; the mouse  
Behind the mouldering wainscot shriek'd,  
Or from the crevice peer'd about.  
Old faces glimmer'd thro' the doors,  
Old footsteps trod the upper floors,  
Old voices called her from without.  
She only said, ' My life is dreary,  
He cometh not,' she said ;  
She said, ' I am weary, weary,  
I would that I were dead.'"—TENNYSON.

Mrs. FAREBROTHERS' homely account had not been exaggerated, Meg had been deeply pained for the good woman's disappointment, when she saw the weary indifference with which Rotha viewed her new possessions ; her simple praises and hints had all been thrown away. Rotha could see nothing but the shadowy Nemesis of her fate lurking in the corners of the rooms. The jingling of the household keys filled her with a sharp pain and dread. While Hannah

opened the presses of sweet-smelling linen, or pointed out the three-cornered cupboard, where the best purple and gold china was kept, or showed her stores of delicate preserves, Rotha's thoughts were far away in the darkened inn-chamber. Again she was wiping the death sweat from the wrinkled brow. She could feel the touch of the clammy fingers clutching hers so desperately, yet powerless to keep their hold. She could see the livid lips parting slowly as the words dropped from them one by one, "Robert, remember it is all for Robert." Good heavens! Who was she that she should be enriched with another man's goods.

Mechanically she followed the other two from room to room. It might have been that she was dazed from her long journey, it was strange how dream-like and misty were her first impressions of her new home; but in a vague unreal way she saw it all.

She noticed that the passages were dark and narrow, and full of curious sweet smells, she found out afterwards from the great jars of dried rose-leaves that flanked every doorway, and blocked up the staircase. And she remembered how the oaken carving of the balustrades attracted her notice, and how broad, and low, and slippery, the staircase was. In a dim sort of way she recalled too, that the dining-room was low and dark, and had heavy, brown wainscoting;


that there were marble pillars in the long drawing-room, and a great Chinese cabinet; and that there was a close, damp odour about the room, as though it had never been used. By-and-by they had come to a little room full of evening sunshine, with glass doors opening on the lawn, with a low couch, and book-cases, and a tea-table, spread with all manner of good things. And Meg had said, "How bright and pleasant! This must be your room, Rotha!" There were tall white lilies peeping in at the window, and there was a great spray of red roses overhead. The church bells were still ringing out. Rotha stood looking at the smooth green lawn, with some carrier pigeons strutting across it. "Now, we will go upstairs, and Miss Maturin can rest and refresh herself," she heard Hannah say, and she had turned herself round to follow them.

They had gone into Mrs. Carruthers's room first, a trifle faded and old-fashioned, but very comfortable, quite a nest of luxury to Meg. The humble creature could have sat down and cried with gratitude at the pleasant lines at last vouchsafed to her. But the strange fixed look on Rotha's face forbade all such demonstration. Rotha was glad that her friend should be made happier by all this comfort. She was glad, too, with a sort of relief, that her own room looked seaward, and was full of many green colours.

She felt unconsciously that even such trifles might influence her moods more healthfully, but nothing had really roused her till Hannah had opened her late mistress's wardrobe, to show the hidden treasures—in the shape of jewels and lace, and then there had been a sharp sound in Rotha's voice, never heard before, as though the action displeased her, and after that they had shown her his room.

Meg was very sorry when she saw Rotha's face at that moment. She understood in a moment the quick revulsion, the heart-sickness, the sudden failure of courage: when Mrs. Farebrothers had left them at last and gone down, she sought Rotha in her own apartment and found it empty. She had gone at once with unerring instinct into Mrs. Ord's chamber. She knew she should find her there. Rotha turned round when she saw her and held out her hand, and the two women passed over the threshold of Robert Ord's chamber and into the chamber beyond with bated breath, as though they were in the presence of the dead.

It was only an ordinary room, fitted up for a young man's accommodation, with a door leading into his aunt's dressing-room. Most of the rooms opened one into another. When he had been a boy this door had been kept open, that she might pass in and out to him more freely. But of late years this mode of entrance




had been closed up. Rotha noted all those particulars. The other boys had slept across the passages, anywhere; but this one, the favourite, had always kept his boyish room, where she had first placed him when he was quite a child, and very delicate, that she might minister to him more entirely. Rotha remembered she had heard all this from Mrs. Ord's maid.

There was a little inner sanctum, which had evidently been a playroom once, and had been furnished up in late years into a kind of rough study. Every article of furniture, every picture on the wall, belonged to the boy or the man. There was the bow and arrows, side by side with the case of pistols, and the formidable gun. A fully-rigged boat under a glass shade, shared the top of the bookcase, in company with a rusty toy sword, and a couple of foils, besides boxing gloves, and a life preserver. The very books in the well-stored bookcase told the same progressive tale. For, while the top shelf boasted of such volumes as "Robinson Crusoe," the "Arabian Nights," and the "Last of the Mohicans," with a sprinkling of battered old school books, the lower shelves held handsomely bound volumes of Sir Walter Scott, Ruskin, Carlyle, and other standard authors. Rotha wondered a little that their owner had left them to such useless repose; but when she had opened one or two her wonder subsided. In every one

there was the same clear, bold handwriting, "Robert Baldwin Ord, from his loving Aunt Charlotte." Somehow that little token of Robert's pride and resentment seemed to send a chill through her heart.

She dropped the books with a sigh, and turned to the pictures. Over the mantelpiece was a wretched daub, representing a curly-headed child in a velvet frock, tearing some bleared red poppies and a few cabbage roses to pieces. Rotha puzzled a little over the unnaturally red cheeks and staring blue eyes, till she saw R. O. in the corner. Some itinerant artist had painted the picture, but it had been thought a striking likeness at the time, and judged worthy of the massive gold frame. On the other side there were crude water-colour sketches done by some boyish hand:—A mastiff's head in crayons, with "Keeper" written in faded ink under it. The others were prints of a sporting character.

Slowly and softly, as one manipulates the relics of the dead, Rotha looked and lingered, and touched softly the several objects that attracted her notice: the ebony inkstand with the faded violet ink at the bottom, the well-used blotting-case, and the carved book-rest; there was the empty birdcage which had successively held a sickly generation of linnets, sparrows, and finches; a mouse-trap and a box fitted up for



dormice still littered the window-seat ; a number of the *Quarterly* lay on the cushion of a great easy-chair as though just flung down. "None of us were allowed to touch a thing in the young master's room," Mrs. Farebrothers had said as she dusted down the table with her apron, and Rotha stood and marvelled at the strange inconsistency of a love that could retain every relic of his boyhood, and yet had never once flinched from its stern purpose till it was too late.

After a while, Meg had drawn her gently away, and it was an evidence of the strong but silent sympathy that existed between these two, that, although no word had been spoken, Rotha was conscious that she was understood, and was grateful for Meg's forbearance.

She made no opposition therefore when Mrs. Carruthers proposed that they should go downstairs. She went back to the sunset and the lilies. The pigeons fluttered up to her as she took the low seat by the window, and tried to do justice to the various dainties that were pressed on her notice, but it was a miserable pretence and failure.

What a quiet meal it was ! neither spoke much, but now and then Rotha dropped some restless word or two. The red evening light fell full on Meg's rugged face and figure ; the large light eyes looked solemn and plaintive beyond their wont ; to the elder woman it seemed as though



the quiet breadths of sky were meet emblems of the long interval of rest that stretched before her. Active suffering had subsided into passive with Meg; the long habits of submission and a certain sturdy endurance went far to reconcile her to the inevitable. It was not that she ever forgot the fact, that there was any actual negation of pain, but it was as though she were some wrecked vessel that had been towed safely into still waters where the cruel storms would cease to buffet her maimed sides, and where there was no fear that she should be torn roughly from her anchorage, where for a little while at least she might be left to float idly and at peace.

Meg could have chanted the *Nunc Dimittis* as she sat there. Afterwards, as she unpacked Rotha's things and put away her own poor little store of clothes and books, she broke into fragments of it; Prue could hear the grave deep voice chanting brief snatches as she put away the things in the sweet-smelling drawers: all sorts of lavender bags and sprigs of rosemary were strewn there. "The green pastures and the still waters"—she was thankful for them all. Here she thought she would dwell safely, doing daily duty and praying loving prayers for her stray sheep—her poor prodigal: she always thought of Jack as she read the story of the Prodigal Son; he was afar off even now feeding on the husks; not till he was ahungered, till the measure of his

degradation was filled up, and want and misery impelled that feeble repentance, should she ever see him again. But she always knew that she would see him.

She had never spoken to any one of this belief of hers till that strange conversation she had had with Rotha in Chatham Place, but such was her natural reticence that not even to her did she again refer to it; she shrank from averring it in open words even to herself. It was an article of her woman's creed, tacitly acknowledged and religiously held. She guarded that simple faith of hers as jealously as though she feared it would not bear the test of human experience. Credo—I believe : how many a woman, disdaining the hard clear light of reason, holds to some such shred of self-made evidence, clinging to it with instinctive trust, seeing God's image in the bleared and miserable wreck of manhood she calls husband : mothers hoping against hope, and leaning all their purer faith on some spendthrift of a man—sisters weeping angel tears over some fallen brother, shuddering away from the sin yet loving the sinner.

Meg never questioned how this thing could be—never asked herself what should bring her guilty husband to her side again ; she only knew that one day he would come : that thought was always uppermost ; in her waking and her sleeping dreams she always saw him coming, some-

times by land, sometimes by sea, but always the same, always ragged, weather-beaten—a wreck of himself. Latterly these dreams had become more frequent; she knew now when she closed her eyes that she would be sure to see him: he was always in beggar's guise, sometimes so changed that even her loving eyes could not recognise him. Now and then he would draw near and hold out his arms to her, and then some unseen power would keep her rooted to the place, and he would go away covering up his face with his hands. Once, when the vision had been terribly real, the thought had come to her to follow him. Meg never thought of that dream without a shudder: she had followed him down long endless roads, each one longer and darker than the last; sometimes she had nearly overtaken him, when a sudden turning hid him from her sight. She tried to cry out to him, to utter his name, but her tongue was powerless, her step grew heavier and more lagging—she would lose him altogether now, but presently she found out that she had a child in her arms, and that this was impeding her progress. With the subtle reasoning of a dream, she thought that if she could only lay the child down by the roadside he must really turn round; but when she tried to free herself it only clung the closer; she could feel the little cold hands creeping over her breast and round her neck. Those baby hands held her

fast with their mysterious hold, and then all at once she knew he was behind her with his face still covered up in his mantle, and, with the child on her bosom, she was trying to draw it away. The cloak felt to her like black velvet, and then it hardened in her touch and broke into splinters as though it were wood; but still she tore and grappled with it, when all at once it rent asunder and there was the grinning face of a skeleton behind it.

Meg had woke from that dream with a loud cry, but she never told any one of her terror. For a few days she went about almost silently, and something of strained pallor in her looks; her faith had received a shock. What if he were already dead and this was her warning! But after a time her strong good sense returned to her, and though she still trembled at times with the remembrance of the ghastly vision, she soon grew to believe that it was only an exaggeration of her excited fancy, and to strengthen herself still more in the thought that she should see him again.

It was strange how this expectation deepened; day by day it harassed her daily walks; she would start and change colour if a beggar suddenly accosted her; often she would turn round to look at some maudlin shrinking wretch that would follow them whining for alms. Rotha would hurry on, or speak sharply; but Meg

always dropped a furtive coin, with a "God bless you," into the shaking hand. Once, when a gipsy beggar with bold eyes stopped their path with an impudent request for money, and Rotha would have dragged her on quickly in the dusk, she had gone a little way and then had made an excuse and left her. When she found him again, there was a thin haggard-looking woman sitting beside him on the roadside with a baby at her breast. The fellow eyed Meg in sullen surprise when he saw her come back and drop a silver piece in his hand. Meg asked to look at the child, and drew the ragged shawl aside with her own hand; the man was brutal and sodden with gin, but the woman was a sickly looking, patient creature.

"The parish has buried four," she said, in a subdued voice that had the pathos of hunger and ill usage in it, "and I reckon they'll have this one too." Meg burst into tears as she put back the fluttering rag over the baby's pinched face. There was an ugly looking wound in its foot which the mother had tried to bind up with a strip of coarse stuff. "The master was in one of his tantrums last night," she whispered, as Meg knelt down to inspect it. "I had the child in my arms and couldn't ward his blow off." Then the man got up and slunk off in search of fresh alms.

Meg tore up her own handkerchief and



bound up the child's foot with tender skill, and then put some silver hurriedly into the woman's hand. "You mustn't let him hurt it again," she said; "when it's dead you'll be so sorry—so very sorry." And as the woman rocked herself, crying, but very softly, lest he should hear her, Meg bade "God bless her, God bless her!" and went hurriedly away.

Rotha saw the tear-stains on her cheeks when she came up; she was waiting at the gate for her—not over-pleased at her defection. "I don't think it well to encourage beggars," she said, somewhat sternly, in answer to Meg's excuse; "and that man was such a repulsive, villanous-looking fellow, and quite drunk besides."

"Yes, I know," Mrs. Carruthers had answered. "But, oh, Rotha!"—and Meg hung her head—"he was so like Jack." And then Rotha had put her arms round her and kissed her.

Meg was thinking about Jack now, as she arranged Rotha's things. There was a great china bowl full of carnations standing on a little round table beside her—dusky-red carnations and fragrant clove pinks. Meg never could bear the smell of those flowers now: they brought back so vividly those days in Chatham Place when Jack was courting her; when she stood of an evening looking at the dark railway arch till he came striding through the posts and down past the triangular green, with the drowsy sheep huddled

together. He used to bring her bunches of roses and carnations—nay, often she would put a few of them in her dress, in the vain hope that their rich crimson might become her. Jack always said they did, but that was one of his lies. Meg's simple chants died away on her lips now, and she made haste to finish her business. She was glad when Prue came in and carried them away. When all was done, she went downstairs and played softly to herself in the twilight. Rotha was out or about somewhere, and Meg knew better than to follow her. As the grand old hymn tunes floated through the empty room, the bitter-sweet memories faded. "Angels ever bright and fair," "Let the bright Seraphim." Meg's courage grew steadfast and strong now, "Up above the thoughts that know not anguish." Meg could almost see the radiance on her parents' dead faces as she wove in the rhythm with the notes, and sang them softly in the darkness:—

"Up above the thoughts that know not anguish,  
Tender care; sweet love for us below,  
Noble pity free from anxious terror,  
Larger love without a touch of woe."

Rotha could hear her singing as she came through the long garden. Meg's voice, so noble in its earnestness, always sent thrills through her; she could have envied her the power of such utterance, it would have healed half her

restlessness to have sat down and sang like that.

Rotha had been terribly restless when Meg had left her to unpack. She had grown weary of the sunset and lilies, and had wandered aimlessly to and fro. Prue and Emma had come upon her gliding through the rooms with her black dress and pale face ; to escape their notice she had betaken herself to the garden.

It was a pretty sunny garden, and well kept, and for a little while Rotha found it pleasant ; but after a time even this seemed too confined, there was a restless oppression on her. By-and-by, she would grow used to her position. She thought now she would go down by the sea-shore a little, and let the soft breezes blow away her pain. There was a green door opening into the lane ; as she came out she could see other green doors a little lower down, and it came across her that one of those must belong to the Vicarage.

The only way to the sands was over the little bridge that was directly opposite Bryn. Rotha was afraid Meg might see her as she hurried across, and in order to avoid her notice and because she would be perfectly alone, she directed her steps to the ridge of low, grassy hillocks that formed the warren. Here she found herself in complete solitude ; as far as she could see, were green undulations, or hills and valleys of soft yellow sand, spread in a connecting chain ; a



railway ran through the lower side of the warren. The ground was rugged and weedy there, but from the sandhills themselves the views were enchanting. Long reaches of sand everywhere; Welburn running out to sea like a long narrow fork, and then the grand blue sweep of Blackscar bay.

The tide was coming in now; there was a delicious cool lapping of waves. As they covered the rocks, the line of foam circled and broke with an endless slow surging. The sunset was over now, the sands looked grey and silent, all sorts of silvery pale lights stirred across the purple shadow of the water, one or two stars trembled out of a long cloud, the air was buoyant with salt spray. Lights sprang out one by one from the distant town; the great building on the sand, which Rotha found out afterwards was the Convalescent Hospital, grew brilliant in a moment; they were lighting the lamps on the sea-wall too. All sorts of creeping shadows came over the barren sands. The air was chilly now. Rotha shivered and stood up and then gave a weary little sigh as she went stumbling up and down in the warren, now climbing up some yielding sand wall, and now sinking ankle-deep in a treacherous bank. She was fairly tired when she had reached the little bridge, but her restlessness had worked itself off a little.

She stopped for a moment at the gate, and

then the fancy seized her that she would stroll round and look at the church; she could see it was lighted up still. She felt very forlorn wandering round her new home, but anything was better than those twilight rooms, she thought. She was glad to feel that she was getting so tired: no worn-out child would sleep sounder than she would now. The choir had been practising in the church. As she went in at the lych-gate two or three village lads came out; one had his surplice on his arm, and as she stood aside to let them pass, a tall man came striding out from the porch. He had a loose wide-awake, very broad in the brim; even in the dark, Rotha noticed the brown-irregular face and the gleaming teeth. The boy with the surplice on his arm seemed waiting for him, for they went on together. Both looked hard at her as they went by.

The organist was still playing; all the lights had been extinguished but one; there was a sweet perfume of lilies as Rotha timidly pushed open the swing doors. One or two gentlemen were in the organ-loft. Rotha could hear their voices speaking in a subdued way as she crept behind a pillar. What a strange, new experience it seemed to her—almost like a dream. The empty church, the roll and swell of the organ, now pealing through the aisles and now dying away, the dim light, the sweet scent, the blurred outline of painted windows, the shadows lurking

among the slender arches ! The void and ache of her own heart suddenly stilled into peace. Rotha never knew how it was that she was kneeling there with the tears streaming through her fingers ; she knew of no conscious prayer that rose to her lips ; but something of the hard bitter strain was lifted off her, the misery and unreality seemed lightened.

When the organ ceased she looked up for the first time, and then rose hurriedly to her feet. They were coming down the aisle now. Rotha crept still further into the shade of her pillar, but they were talking still in under tones and did not see her. One was a large man, with curly hair and wide open grey eyes, and the other—Rotha fell into a strange tremble as he passed—the other was Robert Ord.

The organist had come out now, humming to himself ; in another moment the last light would be extinguished. She could hear them talking in the porch still ; her courage was fast failing her, but there was no help for it. Both looked round in surprise as she came towards them. The elder gentleman, whom she knew to be the clergyman, held open the door and looked kindly at her as she passed. It might have been impulse or mere desperation, but at that moment she moved her eyes and looked full at Robert Ord with a grave, slow inclination of the head ; she never saw whether he returned the salutation or not. Her

heart was throbbing almost to suffocation as she descended the steps. As she passed out of the churchyard, she knew they were following her ; she had an odd sort of feeling as she turned in at her own gateway that they were still watching her through the darkness. The lights were shining at the Vicarage as she passed. Through the open windows she could hear boys' voices ; a deeper voice kept chiming in with a laugh. A womanly shadow moved to and fro across an upper window. Two dusky figures turned in at the gate. Rotha looked up at the starlit sky ; as she went down the gravel path, she could hear Meg singing as she walked up and down trying to calm herself.

When she went in, the lamp had been lighted, a couch stood invitingly near, the curtains were undrawn, and the crisp evening air stole through the open window. Meg gave a welcoming smile as she closed the piano.

"Where have you been, Rotha ? Why, my poor child, how white and weary you look !" she said, as she came forward.

"White and weary, indeed !" Rotha gave one of her wistful smiles as she looked up in Meg's face. "Sit down by me, Meg. How bright and homelike it all looks. I have been very weak and wicked, while you have been singing like an angel ; but it did me good—that and the music in church."

"In church, Rotha?"

"Yes, I have been in church, and on the shore, and everywhere; but I think I liked the music best. As I came out in the porch I saw him, and he saw me. What a handsome man he is, Meg! if only he were not so ungentle."

"Whom do you mean?" asked Meg, anxiously, for there was a strange shining in Rotha's eyes.

"Who? Why, Robert Ord, to be sure—my Nemesis, as I call him. I think I have seen them all now, only no one knew me but he. Meg, wasn't it strange, almost beautiful, after what has passed, that we should meet first there?"

"Do you mean that you met in the church, dear?"

"Yes, and then in the porch. I turned round and looked at him. I felt I had a right to be acknowledged there. I suppose you will chide me for being fanciful, but somehow I took it as a good omen. It seems to me as though it must come right now."

"I quite understand you, dear."

"Do you, Meg?"

"Yes, fully and entirely." And then Rotha, with the same strange shining in her eyes, had bidden her good-night, and gone up to bed.

"Who was that young lady in black who gave you so marked a recognition?" asked the Vicar,

curiously, when he had locked the door and overtaken his brother in the churchyard.

"Oh, you noticed that, Austin, did you?"

"Yes; I was holding open the door for her. I thought she seemed nervous; she passed me so hurriedly. Why, Robert!" suddenly struck by something peculiar in his brother's tone; "you don't mean to say that that was——"

"Our neighbour at Bryn? Indeed I do, Austin. There she is, before us—just turning round by the school-house. You can see her like a black shadow in the distance."

"Good heavens! and that was Miss Maturin?" ejaculated the Vicar; but his brother remained silent.

"To think of her coming to church the first evening," he began again, after a long pause, during which they had been walking on briskly. "Why, she could only have arrived at Kirkby this afternoon."

"I don't know where you got your information, Austin," observed the other, drily.

"Why, I should certainly have heard it from Peter Farebrothers if she had come yesterday. I met him down in Blackscar last evening, but he never said one word about Miss Maturin being expected."

"Peter is not quite such a talker as his wife, I suppose. Well, Austin, what do you think of her now you have seen her? She is no beauty, eh?"

"I could not possibly tell in such a moment. She appeared to be in great trouble, and had evidently been crying. As far as I could see in the dim light she looked very young. I was so surprised when she turned round and bowed to you in that marked manner."

"Wasn't it cool and self-possessed? That is just what I so dislike in those sort of women. They have such an astonishing amount of assurance." And Robert, who was in no very good mood, thought of that walk from Eglistone Abbey, when Rotha had quietly declared her intention of not shunning him.

"Yes; and it was so strange, too, her coming to church the first evening of her arrival," returned the Vicar, who had been much struck by this coincidence. "Are you coming in again to us this evening, Robert?"

"Well, I don't know. I have not said good-night to Belle. Perhaps I will come in for a moment."

The Vicar paused with his hand on the gate.

"Better not say a word about it to-night. Mary has had a worrying day, and Belle does not seem very well. It won't make them sleep sounder to tell them we've seen Miss Maturin."

"That's as you think best," returned Robert, rather shortly. He had no particular wish for any gossip with Mary, but it did strike him as rather hard that he should not say a word or two

about it to Belle. It did not mend matters that Belle had a sick headache, and could not come to the supper-table. He bade them all a gloomy good-night on hearing that, and went back to his desolate house. It looked very desolate to-night. As he turned in at the gate he looked across at Bryn. There were lights moving in the upper windows; there was quite a stream of radiance on the little bridge. "So it has come at last!" he muttered. "I wish I could have spoken to Belle to-night. How oddly the girl looked at me, and how pale she was! Austin was right. She looked younger than usual, or else it was the gaslight. Well, all I hope is that I am not beginning to hate her."

What made Robert Ord pause in his prayers that night—"forgive us our trespasses?" Long after the lights were out at Bryn, and the Vicarage people asleep, Robert Ord tossed wearily on his bed with the broken clause weaving in and out of his thoughts: "forgive us our trespasses."



## CHAPTER XII.

## NETTIE'S CONSPIRACY.

"There was a little stubborn dame  
Whom no authority could tame,  
Restive by long indulgence grown,  
No will she minded but her own."

WILKIE.

"ARE you going to church this evening, Rotha?"

"Yes, Meg."

"Very well; I will accompany you." And without any further word Mrs. Carruthers quickly arrayed herself in her bonnet and shawl and followed Rotha through the green door in the lane.

The day had been a strange one to both the women. It was the first day in their new life together. Rotha had come down to breakfast that morning, looking indeed grave and pre-occupied, but with a certain quiet determination which had grown out of her last night's struggles. Meg, who was watching her, was secretly relieved to see her take the head of the table, instead of relinquishing it to her, as she had once threatened to do. After breakfast she had had a long housewifely conversation with Hannah Farebrothers, and had then asked Mrs. Carruthers to go over

the house again with her. As they went from one room to another Rotha quietly pointed out one or two improvements that might be effected in the arrangements, and asked her opinion. Meg noticed she avoided the passage that led to Mrs. Ord's room till the last, when she had led the way to it hurriedly, saying that Mr. Tracy had wished her to go over the inventory of the plate and linen, and that she supposed that an unpleasant business had better be got over at once.

The stores of shining things, the hordes of velvet and satin and delicate old cobweb-lace were like revelations out of another world to simple Meg, who had never seen anything finer than her mother's collar of real Valenciennes. The fairy godmother in Cinderella might have conjured up those dainty little heaps of Mechlin and point lace. There was a warm subtle fragrance of attar of roses hidden among those heaps. Rotha's slender finger's counted, adjusted and readjusted all in perfect order. "Yes ; that is very beautiful, I suppose ; but I am no judge. There are the collarettes, Hannah ; put them back carefully into the collar-box. I have finished the list now." And the young girl put back her hair wearily from her brow, as though she had finished some troublesome business. Meg could hardly credit such sublime indifference.

They had spent the afternoon on the shore

together, and after tea the bells had rang out, and Rotha had announced her intention of going to the service. Meg would not have gainsaid her for the world ; but she felt terribly anxious. "What a brave spirit she must have !" she thought as she moved down the pew to be nearer to her. Rotha looked across at her with an odd little smile, as though she read her thought. Most of the small congregation were already in the church. The churchwarden, a white-headed old man with square shoulders, lumbered across the aisle and offered her a hymn-book. The tall young man with the brown, puckered face, went swinging across the chancel with stray surplices on his arm ; and the boy who had waited for him the previous evening came out of the vestry door, and looked hard at Rotha as he passed. Just before service commenced, two ladies came in and took their places near her.

Rotha looked at them a little curiously ; they were evidently sisters, and very quietly dressed. The elder lady was rather stout, and had a sweet, motherly face ; and the younger one was very beautiful, but just a little worn and faded-looking. Rotha found herself watching them from time to time with unwonted interest ; directly they had entered, the clergyman took his place in the reading-desk. Rotha recognised him at once as the same who had held open the door for her last night. He read the service in a clear, sonorous

voice. Now and then there were odd breaks in it as of caught breaths, which gave it a momentary hesitation. Rotha noticed this peculiarity in a moment; to her there was something persuasive, almost pathetic in those low, tender breaks. Afterwards when he preached she understood the suppressed power and tenderness of the man. Austin Ord often hesitated in his delivery; his language was simple and often homely; but now and then the force and evidence of the truth within him found outlet in a flood and torrent of words. Then, she was eloquent; then, his power made itself felt; then, he stirred men's hearts, appealing to each separate individuality, winning them less by the power of argument than by the gentleness of love.

"Our parson always seems to be preaching to himself," was the observation of a poor parishioner once; and the homely speech goes far to explain the general tenor of the Vicar's sermons. They were more persuasive than aggressive. The thunders of the law were seldom touched upon except in some case of notorious backsliding, and then the Vicar would be simply terrible. Austin seldom alluded to the pit of perdition; the brimstone and fire of the Dissenters were an offence to him. He rarely informed his flock that they were miserable sinners except when he read the Confession; he left every one to apply to himself "the worm, and no man" of the Psalmist. Instead of

that, he was always telling his people that he loved and pitied them; he spoke to them as though he knew so well that they must be oppressed with their own knowledge of their sin, as though he must help them to bear the sorrow of their own pitiable failures, as though the one thing to be dreaded was their lack of courage. "Never lose heart," he would say, Sunday after Sunday. "A scrupulous sadness cannot help any one; we may be very sorry for what is past, and yet not lose our manhood over it. We have all been spendthrifts, have all wasted our substance; let us at least gather up the fragments that remain."

Ordinary people could not understand this new pitiful code at all: the gentle flame that nourished and warmed so many, was but a feeble spark in their eyes. "We want strong meat, and not milk for babes," they would say, scoffingly. Austin never argued with his detractors, never told them that their digestion was so weak that they could not have borne the strong meat. When one of his clerical brothers remonstrated with him, accusing him of laxity of doctrine and of lowering the dignity of the priesthood, Austin gave one of his wise, kind smiles, and answered slowly—

"A parish priest must be the shepherd of the flock, and must lead and not drive. He would not be either a good or a careful shepherd who

stood over his fallen sheep and threatened them with his staff, instead of helping them to rise, and putting aside the brambles that entangled them." And soon after this, as he was preaching one of his Advent sermons, he suddenly broke out towards the close, in a voice so strong and pleading that it electrified his hearers—

"Am I wrong in striving to win manhood by manhood?—in offering the sweetness and strength of the mingled milk and honey? But life is so short, and God is so good." Then, in a tone that thrilled them through and through: "Oh, gather up the fragments, my brethren; for it may be but a few moments in which you have to condense a life's labour. And you, my sisters, for in your weakness a few crumbs may still be vouchsafed you. You have all loitered long enough in the Lord's vineyard; gather up the fragments that remain—the fragments of your lost lives, your broken work, your wasted opportunities, and above all the rags of your tattered virtues. Oh my children, gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be wholly lost."

Rotha heard that sermon and it abided with her for ever. As it was, his mere voice gave her a comforting assurance of pleasant vigour and strength. The tall young man, whom Rotha fully recognised as another Ord, read the Lessons; she was sure in her own mind that he was the youngest brother, Garton; but all the same he

puzzled her. She could not make him out at all. She thought of the gleaming teeth last night, and the laughter through the Vicarage windows ; she could not reconcile last night's merriment with the stern ascetic face, and dark, closely-cropped hair. As he went swinging backwards and forwards through the chancel with his head thrown well back, and his grand-looking shoulders squaring themselves, he reminded her of some young Knight Templar or monkish soldier of the cross. There was a martial stride with him ; as he sang he kept up a singular swaying of the body—an impetuous yet restrained movement ; a swarthy colour overspread his face. By-and-by, as she came out, he passed her, crunching the gravel with firm footsteps, a boy hanging on either arm, and a whole troop at his rear. Mrs. Carruthers asked “ who was that strange young man in the ugly wide-awake ? ” but Rotha was thinking of the Vicar's voice, and of Belle Clinton's beautiful face, and so she got no answer.

Those evening services were the only breaks in Rotha's solitary days. One, two, and then three weeks had passed over, but still no friendly foot-step invaded the privacy of Bryn—no stranger greeting came to the ears of the two recluses.

For a little while Rotha hoped against hope ; she thought the Vicar must call ; but as the days passed on and he made no sign, she quietly

abandoned all such hopes and began to look her position in the face, and for fear her courage should fail before the blank prospect of her monotonous life, she set herself daily tasks, she took up a slow grinding of regular employment and duties which were to fill up every hour of the day. An idle moment was an abomination to her—she fought her restlessness stoutly. Meg was almost stunned by her prodigious energy.

When her light household duties were discharged, she devoted herself to a severe course of self-improvement. She studied music under Meg's tuition; she even began German. One day she sent in from Blackscar a bale of flannel and some remnants of coarse woollen stuff, and with Mrs. Carruthers' help began to cut it into an infinite number of garments. She made Prue and Emma help; her basket of ready-made linen would have done credit to Dorcas; to see her stitching in the midst of her maids would have astonished the most industrious matron. While she worked she made Meg read to her. Rigid in her self-discipline, she was inflexible and hard in her choice of books. She and Meg did a vast amount of politics and theology. Carlyle and Ruskin were their lightest specimens of literature.

During their hours of recreation they worked in the garden or went down to the shore; now and then they did an afternoon's shopping in




Blackscar. As they passed down Kirkby village Rotha used to look longingly into the open cottages doors : she would have given anything to enter. She was craving for parish work—for intercourse with her fellow creatures—for something that would take her out of herself. Such a monotonous existence might do for Meg. Mrs. Carruthers never wished for society, or found their days dull ; she had her piano and her books, and her daily thought for Rotha's comfort ; but even she would have liked to have ministered to their poorer neighbours. As they passed the school-house she would stop and listen to the children's singing till Rotha would pull her impatiently on.

Rotha never dared to enter one of the cottages ; she used to look wistfully at the women as they stood in the doorway with children clinging to their skirts. One evening during a severe thunderstorm she had made so bold as to beg for a moment's shelter, and the request had been most civilly granted.

Rotha sat by the fire and played with the baby, and told the elder children a story. The mother, who seemed a decent, kind-hearted creature, spoke very respectfully to Miss Maturin and looked pityingly at her black dress.

" You are the lady from Bryn, are you not ? " she asked when the story had come to an end.

Rotha nodded, and at that moment the door



was briskly unlatched, and a lady in a grey cloak appeared on the threshold. Rotha turned crimson, for she knew it was Mrs. Ord.

"Good evening, Nancy; and how are the children?" she began, in a cheerful voice, and then as she came forward she caught sight of Rotha, and stood transfixed. "I have only brought the ticket for little Johnnie," she continued, quickly recovering herself. "Oh! there you are, Johnnie. No, my boy, no, I can't sit down: I am going on to the church now." And before Nancy could interpose a word she had closed the latch and was gone.

"Goodness sake's alive! and to think of her coming and going in such a moment as that," cried Nancy, looking downright vexed. "It is always Miss Belle that is in such a hurry, but never the Vicar's lady. Ah, they're pleasant folk at the Vicarage, and no mistake. Do you often go there, Miss Maturin?" She knew her name even.


"No, I have never been there," returned Rotha, simply, but the instant she said it she felt she had lost ground. The woman was too civil to pursue her inquiry, but she was evidently taken aback. To have been at Kirkby three weeks and not to have called at the Vicarage was a thing that perplexed honest Nancy. Rotha saw the doubt and dim suspicion in the woman's face; she attempted to carry on the conversation,

but she was evidently distrustful of her visitor. Rotha took advantage of a neighbour's entrance to put an end to the awkwardness. As she bade good-bye to the children, one little lad detained her to ask a question about the story. Rotha was just outside the door, speaking to the boy, when she unfortunately caught a sentence or two not intended for her ear.

"And what do you think, Mrs. Price, the Vicar's lady never gave her so much as a 'good evening.' 'I have just brought the ticket for Johnnie,' she says, and 'Nancy, I can't sit down,' and then she shut the door quite quick and sharp, and then I put that there question. Wasn't it strange now?"

"Why, neighbour, I don't know," replied the other voice, evidently belonging to Mrs. Price. "Folks will talk: there's Master Farebrothers always hinting there's ill blood between the Vicarage and the big house. Maybe there is, and maybe there isn't, but all that I say is, that such as her can't be no good if the Vicar's lady wont so much as move to her."

"Move to her, indeed; why——" But here Rotha heard no more, for she dropped the boy's hand hurriedly and moved away. This was what they were doing for her—making her the talk of the village. Rotha did not know much about being sent to Coventry, but it did strike her that she was to be pointed at and set apart, as though




she had some plague-spot on her. She might remain within her own walls, or walk through the village; it was all the same since Kirkby, in the person of its lawful representative, had virtually excommunicated her.

Despite of her efforts to bear up bravely, her hopes were waning fast. As she left the cottage a feeling akin to despair seized her. Of what avail were her endurance and her patience since only four walls were to be the witnesses of her daily struggles? how was she to grapple with her enemies or live down this blot on her good name since they refused to meet her in fair fight? She would have preferred the stormiest encounter and the sternest of rebukes to this cold barrier of distance and silence. They were doing her no harm: they were only letting her alone—simply ignoring her; but no course that they could have pursued, no openly betrayed displeasure, no cutting mark of contempt or dislike could have wounded her half so much. As she went home in the dusk through the wet sandy roads, a heart-breaking sense of failure and utter hopelessness possessed her. Meg was singing a Latin chant as she entered, "In Te Domini speravi." The stars were shining out, there was a gleam of yellow lamplight. Rotha sat down on the wet doorstep under a clump of white lilies, and covered her face with her hands and cried like a child.

Meanwhile the Vicar's conscience was ill at

case; he was in the position of a man whose practice was at variance with his teaching, an element of discord was disturbing his daily peace, conflicting duties harassed him; as he had once exclaimed, in his dry way, "His soul was weary of his life because of this daughter of Heth;" but not even in his soul-weariness could he refrain from avowing himself a coward.

It was all very well for him to scoff at procrastination; how often had he told his people that it was a weakness beneath a reasonable man? "Never put off till to-morrow what ought to be done to-day," had been his favourite maxim. "Delay only complicates matters and doubles a difficulty." "Now," is the wise man's axiom, and "presently" the fool's motto—all very good words doubtless. And now he was himself deferring a plain duty day by day, putting it away from him, striving to forget it with the by-and-by of the most arrant coward. No wonder the Vicar's conscience was ill at ease, and that his cup had lost much of its sweetness. And now his words had come true, for he was doubling his own difficulty. The longer he delayed, the more he disliked the whole business. A peacemaker by nature and profession, he was loth to stir up strife and ill-feeling with any man or woman, and in his secret heart he believed that such must be the issue of any visit on his part. In his large-hearted tolerance he



had refused to give entire credence to his brother's suspicions. He had declined to criminate or to let others criminate without satisfying proof. He had rebuked Robert for his rancour. He had not refrained from accusing Mary of a want of charity. But all the time he was aware that Robert's words were prejudicing him against Miss Maturin. He had gone over them day after day and night after night, till not a shadow of doubt remained in his own mind. Yes, the temptation was so evident. There was such facility and scope for any feminine manœuvres. Putting himself in her place, and looking from her point of view, he could even believe it hard for her to do otherwise. All people were not gifted with the same delicate perception of honour, the same stainless integrity. It was an error and weakness of youth, not the deep scheming of age. And yet youth could scheme too. She was poor and covetous, and covetousness was a deadly sin. But all the more he considered it his duty not to be hard on her. She had looked longingly on what was not her own, and had sought after it, and worked for it. Hundreds had done the same, and no one thought worse of them. But all the more he felt as though he must keep his womankind from such an one.

After all the Vicar was not free from the Ord feeling, only there was this difference in the

brothers, that while Robert hugged and cherished his pride, Austin wrestled against it as a fierce enemy, and mourned over it as a heavy sin. No one knew better than he how often it had got the better of him and warped his judgment; how many of his failures known only to him and his God, were attributable to this hereditary failing. Conscious of his own shortcomings, he could bear with the faults and follies of others. He knew why his heart was so unnaturally hardened against this girl, why he could not hold her blameless. He was resenting his family wrongs, his injuries in his brother's person; the Ord poverty so grimly mated with the Ord pride. Do what he would, he knew he had not really brought himself to forgive her. The mere mention of her name was abhorrent to him. How was he to go to her on his pastoral errand, to calmly sift evidence, and discriminate and judge; to reprove temperately and gravely if needs be, as he had reproved greater sinners than ever she was ever likely to be? Would he not be rather tempted by his very sternness to break the bruised reed, and to repel rather than to allure her?

Our Vicar was perplexing himself sadly over these difficulties during these weeks that he held himself aloof from his new parishioner. But while he was summoning up his courage for a final effort, the Gordian knot was cut for him

in a most unexpected way. Nettie Underwood, no uninterested an observer of the Vicarage movements, had determined to give her parish priest a lesson.

During the first two or three weeks after Miss Maturin's arrival, Nettie had kept herself tolerably quiet, only dropping out hints now and then as to whether cards had been left at Bryn; hints which had always been coolly quenched by the Vicar. But when a month had passed over, and the Vicarage party made no mention of their wealthy neighbour, Nettie's curiosity and indignation exceeded all bounds. She accused the Vicar and Mary too of want of charity. A very tolerant little person herself, she began to take up cudgels openly in Miss Maturin's defence, and announced her intention very speedily of befriending the stranger who had come into their coast.

Perhaps this was the more provoking in Nettie, as this line of conduct was dictated solely by curiosity and a sheer love of opposition. Nettie was not personally prepossessed with Miss Maturin. She had seen her at church once or twice, and had spoken of her contemptuously, as a poor, sickly-looking body, and had been much offended at her dowdiness. Had she been any one but the owner of Bryn, she would have held her up pitilessly to the sarcasm of her three-and-twenty bosom



friends. But the mystery that enshrouded Bryn, the strange recluse lives of the two women, the silence of the Vicarage concerning them, and the whispers which daily became bolder and more exaggerated in the village, fired Nettie's giddy little head, and filled it with all sorts of impracticable schemes and fancies.

Nettie was of course aware that Robert Ord had been disinherited by his aunt. Kirkby and even Blackscar were generally cognizant of the main facts of the quarrel which had ended so disastrously for the three brothers. Already there had been many shrewd surmises in the village, that Miss Maturin would be looked upon pretty coldly by the Ords. They had but slightly guessed the truth, however. Such a suspicion as was darkening Robert Ord's mind was never likely to come to their knowledge. Nothing was more probable than that a coolness should at first ensue between Bryn and the Vicarage. And however much such a state of things was to be deplored in the parish, it was only human nature all over. People were talking the matter over pretty freely by this time. There were speculations afloat about how long the Vicar was likely to hold aloof from his new parishioner. "It was a pity for him to fight his brother's battles," they said. "Every one knew how Robert had brought the trouble on

himself by his unyielding spirit. They would wait a little longer to see if the Vicar and his wife meant to do their duty; if not it was certainly fitting that others should set them an example of Christian charity."


Robert Ord had little idea how his daily movements were being canvassed and censured. It must be confessed that in spite of his handsome face and prepossessing manners, he was scarcely such a favourite with his contemporaries as his brothers. The lordly airs and proud bearing that might have become the owner of Bryn, were sadly out of character in the managing clerk who lived in a shabby house on two hundred a year. People called him exclusive and unsocial; and Belle was scarcely more of a general favourite. Amongst his bitterest detractors was Nettie Underwood, who had taken an honest dislike to him, from his having ridiculed certain of her airs and graces. Nettie, who accepted no reproofs except from the Vicar, was at no pains to hide her antagonism, and a most amusing feud was carried on between them.

When Nettie prepared to enter the lists in Miss Maturin's defence, she chose to believe the whole blame of the coolness lay at Robert Ord's door. The Vicar was influenced by his brother; neither he nor Mrs. Ord cared to anger him by taking notice of their neighbour. What if she,

Nettie Underwood, should put an end to this unhappy state of things, and by a bold move contrive such a meeting for all parties as should restore matters to a better footing?

True, it was rather a risk. Nettie was not quite sure that such a course would be successful. The Vicar might not approve of such scheming, or Mrs. Ord might be annoyed. Nettie thought and thought over the matter till her small head ached, and she was in quite a fever of excitement before she could bring her tactics to perfection, and make up her mind that the game was worth playing.

Nettie Underwood was by nature a schemer ; to plan and to manœuvre were the pleasantest excitements of her daily life. Every one knew what odd, out-of-the-way things Nettie was always doing. She had curious systems, even in her charities. Her almsgiving was always conveyed anonymously. People never knew their benefactress till weeks afterwards, when Nettie's mysterious hints betrayed her. Aunt Eliza was her pet fiction. She caused it to be popularly supposed that she could do nothing without her Aunt's permission. Applicants to Miss Underwood the younger were always referred to Miss Underwood the elder. That worthy lady was often perplexed by the constant appeals made to her in public. " I know nothing about it ; you must go to my Niece," she would say, helplessly. Nettie's



harum-scarum ways were a sore grief and worry to poor Aunt Eliza.

As in duty bound, Nettie confided to her aunt her little plan for breaking the ice between Bryn and the Vicarage. And as the more she thought about it the more feasible the whole scheme appeared, she grew quite eloquent over her subject; and though Miss Underwood shook her head very doubtfully, she was soon coaxed and talked into a state of negative quiescence. "You leave it all to me, Auntie. I tell you I've arranged everything. We will have Miss Maturin and her dragon, Mrs. Carruthers, to tea, and ask the Vicarage party to meet them, Mr. Robert and all." And Nettie clapped her hands in mischievous delight at the thought of her daring scheme.

"Shall you tell the Vicar, my dear, that Miss Maturin is coming?" asked Miss Underwood, anxiously.

"Gracious, Aunt!" returned the girl, opening her eyes. "How can you ask such an absurd question? Why, there would be no good in asking them at all in that case. No, no; you leave it to me. I will go down to Bryn to-morrow and make a ceremonious call, and when I am quite sure of Miss Maturin I will go over to the Vicarage."

"But suppose the Vicar should be displeased at your officiousness, Nettie?" remonstrated Miss Underwood. "Remember you are only a young

person, my dear. You see, we don't know the rights of the case. Mr. Ord may have some very good reason for not hurrying on an intimacy. If, as you say, the ice must be broken by a third party, wouldn't it be better for Mrs. Blake, or Miss Brookes, as the leading ladies in this parish, to undertake the business? I hear Mrs. Blake is most anxious to call at Bryn."

"The Underwoods are every bit as good as the Blakes, Aunt Eliza," said Nettie, tossing her head, "though she is the widow of the Colonel, and goodness knows what besides. And as for Miss Brookes and her Roman nose, and her broad hemstitched handkerchiefs, with cotton lace on them, I have no patience with her and her airs; and all because she's first cousin to a baronet, who beat his wife and died of drink. I haven't a Roman nose, thank heaven! nor had a gouty old colonel for a husband; but if I don't hold my own against two such women, my name's not Nettie Underwood. And as for your trying to dissuade me from a clear Christian duty, and one that the Vicar will thank me for—why," finished Nettie, losing breath and connectedness together—"why, I didn't think it of you."

"Well, well, my dear! don't go and put yourself out."

"But I am putting myself out, and one ought to put oneself out to do one's duty."

You are like the Levite, Aunt, 'who passed by on the other side.' I hope I've not read my Bible for nothing, Aunt Eliza—and such a beautiful copy of it too as you have given me! And when I see the clergyman of a parish neglecting his duty, and making his family neglect it too, and when I see an innocent girl slighted and put upon, just because an ill-tempered old lady chooses to leave her her money, I think it's time for the members of that parish to testify their displeasure; and I won't sleep another night upon it. I will just go over this instant to Bryn." And Nettie rose decidedly, having reasoned herself into a belief that her scheme had not a single flaw in it.

The visitors' bell at Bryn had grown quite rusty with disuse. As its hollow clang sounded through the house, Rotha and Mrs. Caruthers quite started. Rotha was the first to recover herself. "I suppose it is the Vicar come at last," she said, with a little colour and dignity. But her hands trembled as she shook the threads from her dress. Both were therefore disappointed when the door opened, and a little lady, with bright eyes and colour, and dressed in fresh, crisp muslins, entered the room.

"I see you don't know who I am," said Nettie, winningly, as she held out her hand with the utmost frankness. "I am Nettie Underwood, who lives in the little corner house, next

door to the sexton's, and opposite the lich-gate. Aunt Eliza would have come with me, but she is cutting out for the clothing club; and as we are neighbours, and that sort of thing, I thought I might just come over without ceremony."

Nettie had introduced herself with perfect ease, and with a fluency that rather astonished Rotha. It was something pleasant after their long seclusion to have this bright, chatty little creature owning herself for their neighbour, and making friendly overtures. Rotha a little relaxed from her gravity as she strove to answer Nettie's numerous questions; during the next half hour she felt as though she were being put through her catechism, only the answers were far more difficult. "What is your name, N. or M?" Rotha found herself dreamily answering, "that it was a fine day; that she liked Kirkby; that the rabbit-warren was delightful, and Bryn a most pleasant house; that no one had called upon her, and that she was not disappointed, having never expected otherwise; that the sermon on Sunday was a very good one; and that above all things she admired the Vicar's preaching. And at this part of the conversation she turned round and began hurriedly to question Nettie as to whether there were much distress in the parish. Nettie tried to bring the conversation back to the Vicar's family, but Miss Maturin

became suddenly reserved ; her artful questioning was of no avail. Rotha listened ; but seemed absent and preoccupied. She had resumed her work too, most industriously. Nettie fancied that she was much interested in the few details that she dropped for her benefit concerning them, but she made no observation, and seemed rather relieved than otherwise when Nettie turned the subject, by abruptly introducing the object of her visit. "Aunt Eliza and she had set their hearts on making her acquaintance. Yorkshire people were never ceremonious. And would she and Mrs. Carruthers just come over to-morrow, in a quiet, homely way ?—they were only plain folk," and so on.

Miss Maturin coloured and hesitated ; she would have given worlds to refuse the invitation. On the whole, she was rather disposed to like Nettie Underwood : she thought her a most winning little person—she was so original and piquant, and then her good-natured frankness was so taking. She was quite prepared therefore to reciprocate her advances in a general way, but Rotha was rather shy and reserved ; even taking tea with Nettie and her aunt seemed a formidable thing after the quiet life they had been leading.

"Supposing other guests—the Vicarage people, perhaps—may be there ?" She hinted as much as she stammered out a civil refusal.



"Oh, of course, quite by ourselves : Aunt Eliza cannot bear parties," was Nettie's evasive answer. By-and-by, when she had gained her point, and had left Rotha much flattered at the prospect of this sudden gaiety, she felt rather ashamed of her little fiction.

"I shall have to tell her it was an afterthought," said wicked Nettie to herself, as she knocked at the door of the Vicarage. "'In for a penny in for a pound.' I hope fibs are not very sinful. We are told that we mustn't do evil that good may come. One can't do everything that is in Aunt Eliza's Bible. I suppose it is a fib not to call myself Eliza Ann. I wish there were some punishment invented for every person who gave an ugly name to a child. Eliza Ann, indeed!" And then Nettie dressed her face in smiles as she walked into Mrs. Ord's presence.

Nettie did not find the second part of her business so difficult as the first. Nettie Underwood's little tea-parties were no novelty to the Vicarage folks ; many pleasant evenings had been spent in the little house next door to the sexton's, and in truth Aunt Eliza was somewhat of a favourite at the Vicarage.

"Yes, they would come," Mrs. Ord answered, graciously. "She could answer for Austin and Garton, and even Belle made no objection ; and, if Belle came, of course Robert would accompany her ; yes, to-morrow would suit them very well,

as the boys were all going to a school tea-drinking."

Nettie did not stay long when she had got her answer: she was afraid the Vicar might come in and gainsay his wife's words. To tell the truth, she was a little nervous. She had played her cards well, the cause was a good one—she was more than ever convinced of that; she was rather inclined to look upon herself in the light of a heroine; there was a pleasant spice of novelty and excitement about the whole affair. But still the idea of the Vicar coming in just now made her a little nervous.

Her spirits rose perceptibly when she found herself in her own little drawing-room.

"Well, my dear?" inquired Aunt Eliza, rather anxiously.

"Well, Aunt, they are all coming to-morrow, and so we must make the best of it. It is a pity you did not come with me to Miss Maturin's, for I am sure you would have been charmed: she is just one of your and Mrs. Blake's sort—goody-good, and that sort of thing, you know. She and the Dragon—what a hideous woman that Mrs. Carruthers is! and Miss Maturin's no beauty—were cobbling a lot of old serge and flannel; there was a clothes-basketful, and they had Macaulay's Essays open on the table—isn't she an estimable young woman, aunt?—and they both looked as dowdy and dreary as a

couple of Quakeresses. I had to talk hard to keep my spirits up all the time."

"And she's no beauty, you say?" inquired Miss Underwood, who, in spite of her beard and her loud manly voice, had a great fondness for good looks.

"A beauty? Good gracious, no, aunt! She has smooth hair and a nice figure and white hands, I believe, and people would call her lady-like; but she has the palest face I ever saw—quite sickly-looking, and any one could see she has been a companion. There's no style about her, and she was so quiet and inanimate." And here Nettie groaned, and threw herself down on the sofa with a querulous petition to Aunt Eliza to go and see after the tea.

## CHAPTER XIII.

## NETTIE'S TEA-PARTY.

"Thy heart can feel, but will not move ;  
Thy soul, though soft, will never shake."

LOED BYRON.


It is a singular fact, and one worthy of remark, that the great master-minds of humanity have been known actually to seek repose on the eve of some gigantic enterprise, which was to change the destinies of nations. Wellington, for example, could wrap himself up in his cloak and snatch a few moments of refreshment before Waterloo ; and, as far as I know, Napoleon and Alexander the Great may have done the same. I am not aware whether it be permissible in logic to deduce small inferences from greater facts, or to compare the less with the greater. What I was about to state somewhat grandiloquently was, that Nettie Underwood slept as soundly as ever the night before her tea-party.

Calmness in an emergency presupposes greatness of mind. Nettie slept the sleep of the just, and woke in a bustle.

Straws will show which way the wind is. Long before breakfast was over in the small corner


house by the sexton's, the entire household, consisting of Aunt Eliza, two feminine domestics, and a very fat spaniel, who went by the name of Lumber, were made fully aware that the young mistress was not perfectly easy in her mind, and that something rather out of the common was to happen to them this evening. Nettie, who would not have owned for worlds that she was nervous, but who felt nevertheless like some miniature Guy Fawkes, who had entered into a conspiracy to blow up somebody, which would end probably in her being blown up herself. Nettie was in a fuss and tangle from morning to night.

Rather an indolent housekeeper, and in fact ruling vicariously, Aunt Eliza being both head and hands, Nettie on this occasion floundered helplessly in buttery and china cupboard, whisking things into their wrong receptacles, and rustling in her voluminous skirts into all sorts of improbable places. She nearly drove Sarah, a stout Lancashire wench, frantic, by standing over her to watch the compounding of certain sponge-cakes and fancy biscuits ordered for her guests' delectation. She got a pestle and mortar and set to work herself, rolling up her sleeves above her white elbows, and enveloping herself in a floury apron. Sarah would have gladly dispensed with her help; she beat up the eggs into a thin froth, her pounded sugar was lumpy, she could not keep her hands off a certain stewpan where



peaches were simmering ; when extra heat was required she would keep opening the oven-doors in her interest to look after the spiced bread. Half an hour after that she was harassing Aunt Eliza and Catherine, in the china cupboard. She broke one of her favourite violet-and-gold cups ; that calmed her for a little while, and then she went off to her flower-vases, but even these did not satisfy her. A little basket of bright-coloured leaves that she had arranged for the centre of the table turned out a failure. Fussy work is seldom successful work, as Nettie was finding to her cost.


As for Aunt Eliza, she could hardly call her soul her own. Nettie's tea-parties were always trials of patience to that much-enduring woman. Her niece's orders were so apt to be contradictory. But to-day her powers of endurance were severely tested : she had to loop and unloop the curtains a dozen times for Nettie's inspection ; her arrangement of chairs and table was declared too stiff and then too straggly ; the card-basket was first to be produced and then hidden in obscurity ; books and engravings were declared stereotype and formal, and peremptorily interdicted, and yet the dining-room table was finally strewn with them. Aunt Eliza sat down on the sofa and fanned herself with the feather-broom and duster by turns, while her niece talked and argued the matter.



Long before the proper time arrived Nettie coaxed her Aunt to go up and dress. Miss Underwood in her innocence was for putting on a certain well-preserved black silk which she called her second best company dress, and was judged good enough for all home occasions. To her sore perplexity Nettie turned up her nose at this respectable garment, and insisted on a violet chène, which she had lately and mysteriously presented to her aunt wrapped in a soft white Lama shawl. Now, to poor Aunt Eliza's manifest discomfiture, both shawl and dress were to be worn.

"But, my dear, my best silk dress for visiting, and just because the Vicar and his wife, and this young lady are coming! Supposing I get it spotted at tea-time? Catherine is so careless, and——"

"Now, Aunt Eliza," said positive Nettie, "what is the good of your talking as though you had only onegown in the world? When it is shabby you shall have another—that's all. And mind you pin your collar straight, and don't rumple your cap-strings. You know you can make yourself look nice if you like." And Nettie, who in her secret heart believed that Aunt Eliza was a very handsome woman, in spite of her brown front, patted her aunt coaxingly with her little fat hands, and finally turned her out of the room.



When Miss Underwood returned in her robes of majesty, with her best and glossiest front, and with a certain pleasant consciousness of a French silk which stood alone with richness, she was a little disappointed to find her niece had donned a simple every-day dress. Nettie sometimes affected simplicity and childishness. Perhaps she knew the blue ribbons matched her eyes, and that the white dress set off those rosy cheeks of hers. She was in quite a flutter of spirits by this time.

"Now, Aunt Eliza," she began, as she flitted round her relation, settling her brooch and pulling in all the crooked pin-points—Aunt Eliza's pins were always crooked—"I will tell you what I have been thinking about. Mrs. Ord and Belle are sure to come first; they always do. Now, I don't want to spoil the fun by going out to receive Miss Maturin, and to send a servant after her will be so formal. So, Aunt Eliza, when you hear the bell, you must just go to the top of the stairs, and so break the ice a little."

"Wouldn't Catherine do better, my dear?" ventured Miss Underwood, who felt instinctively that she and her dress ought to be in the sofa corner, for even Aunt Eliza could be dignified sometimes.

"Now, Aunt, how can you be so silly?" returned Nettie, crossly; "when I have just said a servant would be so formal. I thought



this was going to be your evening. I'm sure I said as much to Miss Maturin. I laid a stress on your wanting to make acquaintance with her, I know; and now when I've contrived a little pleasure for you, and you looking so beautiful too in your new dress," continued artful Nettie, "you are going to be disagreeable and spoil it all."

Aunt Eliza was a big woman, but she was not proof against such flattery. She gave Nettie one of her loud kisses as she sat fondling Lumber rather sulkily, and promised to do her best by their visitor.

Nettie was right in one of her surmises. Mrs. Ord and Belle did arrive first; Mary came in, looking very bright and cheerful, with her work in her hand; but Belle looked unusually ill. Both established themselves very cosily at Miss Underwood's work-table. Mary made a laughing apology about the size and quantity of her work.

"Fancy work only makes me restless," she said, in answer to a satirical observation of Nettie's. "I always think it waste of time, only fit for fine ladies, or for the Nettie Underwoods of society," she finished, slyly. "Belle does a little sometimes; she likes all the ornamental parts—the braiding, &c. I sometimes make believe that darning is my fancy work: I have to do such quantities of it."

"Why did you not bring your darning to-

night, Mrs. Ord?" said Nettie, who was not more than half pleased at such specimens of industry in her own drawing-room. And then the Vicar came in and began to play with his wife's reels of cotton, as he talked to Nettie.

"Garton will be here directly," he observed presently; "he is only waiting for Robert."

"Mr. Robert is coming then!" exclaimed Nettie, joyfully, who had been rather uncertain till this moment whether her adversary had decided to lower his weapons on this occasion.


"Oh yes! he is coming," returned the Vicar, as he glanced with an amused smile at Belle. And Nettie, who was rather quick at such things, took it into her wise little head that there had been some words on the subject; and she was sure of it when Robert entered a few minutes afterwards with his brother.

Robert was in one of his difficult moods; he had been very wrathful when he had heard of Nettie's tea-party, and with Belle for accepting the invitation. He did not like Nettie Underwood, as she well knew; he thought her a forward, presuming little person; but when Belle was for staying at home and letting Mary go without her, he was just as displeased. Why should she be moping at home alone? People were always accusing her of reserve and exclusiveness. He wished her to mix more with other girls, and rub off some of her shyness. Go! Of course he

would go. Wasn't it his privilege to escort her everywhere? Poor Belle could not tell him that such unwilling gallantry was valueless in her eyes; but she made up her mind that her evening would be spoilt, and spoilt it was.

Robert knew he had been disagreeable and contrary, and when he entered the little drawing-room he was in that stage of penitence which is rather aggressively sulky. He thought Belle must know he felt sorry; but as there was no evidence of such sorrow in his face, Belle did not know it, and felt that he grudged her her little pleasures. She had been rather inclined to think the tea-party would be rather amusing, but if Robert were going to be stiff and silent he would spoil every one's pleasure. Poor Belle! she need not have troubled herself, for it was not ordained that Robert should be the wet-blanket of the evening. Nettie changed colour when the ominous bell was heard. She talked fast and nervously to Garton when Aunt Eliza rose to leave the room. After all, Aunt Eliza's task was the easier.

Miss Underwood was accustomed to look at everything from her niece's point of view. She remembered Nettie's disparaging words regarding their visitor, and was therefore agreeably disappointed and not a little surprised at the favourable impression made on her own mind by the young stranger.



Miss Maturin turned round with a winning smile as the elder lady advanced, her little overtures of help were acknowledged by the young girl in a very sweet, low voice. Miss Underwood stood by admiringly, as Rotha smoothed the coil of dark brown hair, which showed the small head to such advantage; she thought the clinging black dress set off the tall, slender figure to perfection, and could not understand Nettie's accusation of dowdiness. They were quite friendly by the time they came downstairs, Miss Underwood's voice travelling before them as usual.

"You never told us you had a visitor, Nettie," said Mary, putting down her work with an air of mild surprise. The Vicar stopped in the midst of a ludicrous anecdote that he was narrating, and shot a sharp, suspicious glance at the door.

"No, I—I——" It was an afterthought she was going to add, but she was spared the additional fib by the entrance of Miss Maturin. There had been quite a buzz of voices round Mary's little work-table, but at this unlooked-for apparition a dead silence fell on the whole party. Nettie's quick nervous voice broke upon it quite abruptly as she went through the necessary introductions.


"How dreadfully late you are, Miss Maturin! I hoped you would not have been so ceremonious—we are all friends here. Mrs. Ord, Miss Clinton, Miss Maturin, the Vicar; Mr. Robert, I think you

know already,"—and so on. Considering all things, Nettie did it pretty well.

Rotha bowed gravely as she acknowledged each introduction, and then for a moment her dark eyes glanced reproachfully at her young hostess. "You told me that you would be quite alone, Miss Underwood?" she said, in a low voice, but which was perfectly audible to every one in the room. In spite of its gentleness it testified to some displeasure.

Nettie coloured and hesitated; she was sure her little scheme was discovered now—it would never do to tell any more fibs about it. "Afterthoughts and surprises are sometimes pleasant," she said, rather saucily. "We Yorkshire folk are rather famed for our hospitality. We are often given to entertain angel's unaware." Nettie knew that the Vicar was apt to rebuke her for irreverent quotation, and she rather hoped he would do so now—anything would be better than that stiff silence. But the Vicar was determined to hold his peace till a more fitting opportunity.

"Oh, Nettie!" said Mary, much shocked; and then she too relapsed into dumbness. Rotha flushed up crimson as she glanced round the circle once or twice rather pleadingly. She was vexed and indignant for them as well as herself. She saw what a trap had been set for them all, and felt humiliated in her own eyes. She turned



a little away from Nettie after that flippant answer of hers, and addressed herself to Miss Underwood.

It was no use endeavouring to secure harmonious relations at present—they must fit into their places by-and-by. Nettie was inclined to take the whole matter rather coolly now. Miss Maturin's cold shoulder made her cross; every one felt awkward and annoyed, and tried to get rid of this feeling by talking as fast as possible; the circle broke up into twos—a discord of duets jarred everywhere. Garton fenced himself up in a corner with Lumber, and tried to teach him tricks. Robert came over to Belle's side and talked sulkily in her ear. Rotha, dropping out of the conversation, now carried on between Mrs. Carruthers and Miss Underwood, heard fragments and snatches of the whole.

"Trust!—paid for! Look at him, Bob; how well he balances my shilling! Miss Nettie, your dog is a paragon of talent. Come, Lumber, sit up again."

"I don't think the new curate will do at all, my dear: that stammer seems inveterate, and is very disagreeable; the old people complain sadly of him."

"What a pity! And he seems such a good, earnest young man, Austin."

"Yes, it is lamentable how all good, earnest young men with impediments in their speech

think themselves especially fitted for the Church. In my opinion even the slightly-halt and maimed ought to be debarred from the service of the sanctuary; incompleteness or imperfection there, ought not to be tolerated. George Greenhithe is a fine fellow, but to my mind he has mistaken his vocation."

"We can't get the mothers to work, my dear," came in Miss Underwood's deep bass; "some of them have never been taught even to put in a patch."

"You might have classes for the elder women," returned Mrs. Carruthers, timidly.

"Yes, and waste all our firing and gas. Bless you! we can't get the mothers to attend. Some are laundresses or charwomen; go out at seven in the morning, and never get home till eight in the evening. 'How am I to mend my children's clothes now?' said one, only the other day; 'why, it's eight or sometimes nine before I get back, and by the time I've cleared up the place a little, and washed out a few things, and got my master's supper, I'm just clean ready to drop.' And so they are. What those poor creatures have to go through, some of them! And that's why good ready-made linen, that they can buy cheaply with a few pence, is such a help to them. We are making striped shirts for the men now."

"Oh! do let me help, Miss Underwood," ex-

claimed Rotha, eagerly. "Mrs. Carruthers and I do a great deal of that sort of work."

"Aunt Eliza, ain't we ever going to have tea?" broke in Nettie's fretful voice at this juncture; and Aunt Eliza dropped her knitting-needles in some confusion as she started up in obedience to her niece's summons.

There then ensued another awkward pause. "Will you take my Aunt downstairs, Mr. Ord?" said Nettie, decidedly; "and, Mr. Robert, please give your arm to Miss Maturin. The rest of us can pair ourselves." And she laughed over her shoulder as she took possession of Mrs. Ord. But Mary had not her pleasant smile ready for her.

Belle looked after her lover, anxiously, as she saw him cross the room on his unwelcome errand; it made him still more angry to see how simply and naturally Rotha accepted his attention—somehow, she was always compelling him to admire her dignity.

"I wonder when English people will renounce some of their ridiculous customs?" he said, in an offhand manner, more by way of saying something than with the wish to make himself agreeable.

"With what custom are you finding fault at present?" inquired Rotha, with the utmost ease. She was astonished at herself to-night.

"That of walking to meals two-and-two, like



the animals in the Ark. I would as leave have the Shakers' single file—women first and men afterwards."

"Englishmen, and foreigners too, are more sociable than that," returned Rotha, unable to conceal a smile. "Who are the Shakers? I have never heard of them."

"A ridiculous sect in America," was the unsatisfactory reply; and then the Vicar said grace.

But in spite of Rotha's easy dignity and Nettie's talkativeness, it was not a sociable meal. Full justice was not done to the dainty provisions; Aunt Eliza's excellent Souchong had lost its flavour; every one missed the Vicar's merry speeches and droll jokes: Austin was very grave—a sure sign that he was displeased; he talked parochial matters with Miss Underwood, quite ignoring his favourite Nettie. Garton sat between Belle and Mary, and kept up a low-toned conversation with them. Mary tried to include Mrs. Carruthers once or twice, but Meg was shy, and gave blunt, abrupt answers. The jarring elements were not to be reconciled.

Robert talked across the table to them at intervals; now and then he addressed some stereotyped remark to his next-door neighbour: "He hoped she had enjoyed her visit to London?" "No," she answered frankly, "she had been in no mood for enjoyment, but they had made her

very comfortable. She had liked Mr. Tracy's wife and daughters very much."

"Rather old-fashioned," Robert surmised, with a slight sneer.

"Oh, old-fashioned, of course. But she liked such old-world ways: it was rather refreshing after so many foolish novelties."

Robert tried to be politely interested, but the failure was evident. Rotha bent over her plate in relieved silence till the next remark was forthcoming.

"Did she like Kirkby?" Rotha gave a quick, startled flush, and then an odd sort of courage came to her.

"I like Kirkby sands and sea, Mr. Ord," she answered quietly, "better than I like Kirkby welcome." And at that moment by a strange coincidence her eyes met the Vicar's. Somehow that look of honest reproach struck the ground from the Vicar's feet; he was glad that the sudden ringing out of the church bell gave him an excuse for withdrawing.

"Why, you are never going to the service, Mr. Ord?" cried Nettie, in genuine dismay, as she saw him rise. "It is Mr. Greenhithe's week. Besides, it is too cruel to break up our evening like this."

"I will look in again after church, and fetch Mary," was the uncompromising answer; and Nettie's heart sank most unpleasantly as she

marshalled her little party upstairs. Garton had his sacristan's duty to perform, and accompanied his brother. Nettie did not like to confess that she had failed, but she felt terribly cross. She left her remaining guests to do what they would, while she seated herself at the piano and ran off a valse, which jarred sadly with the bells. Nettie always played valse when she was out of temper. Aunt Eliza smoothed her silk dress nervously, and left off talking to Mrs. Carruthers when she heard the flourish of the keys. Robert hummed the tunes softly as he turned over the big scrap-book and album on the centre table. Mary and Belle were snugly at their work again. Botha, lacing and interlacing her long fingers on her lap, suddenly took heart of grace and approached them.

"Do let me help 'you,'" she said, rather hurriedly, and taking up some work of Mrs. Ord's that lay on the table. "I do so like braiding, and I am so tired of doing nothing. May I take this pinafore and try?" And she looked so pleadingly at Mrs. Ord that Mary could not refuse her. "Thank you; then I will take this to begin on. No, do not disturb yourself," as Mary made room for her on the sofa, "I shall see better by the centre lamp;" and she carried off her work and began to sew contentedly.

Robert looked across at her now and then as he turned over the big folio: the lamplight

streamed full on her—on her brown hair and long eyelashes and pale face. It was an interesting face, after all, he thought, only too long and thin, but the mouth was very sweet. Those covert glances made him both moody and confused. What was there about this girl, so seemingly gentle, he thought, that turned him to gall and bitterness? Do what he would, he could not make her look conscious or ashamed; there she sat, a stranger and alien amongst them, knowing and owning herself as such, and quietly acquiescing in such knowledge. The very dignity of her meekness tried him sorely; no blame could be attached to the modest reserve in which she had chosen to entrench herself. Hypocritical or real, he felt instinctively that the impression made upon his brother's mind must be a favourable one, and his brow grew blacker at the thought: how was he to prevent himself from hating her? Aunt Eliza's voice struck in most opportunely now.

"Nettie, my dear, Mrs. Carruthers is good enough to say that she will sing to us."

Nettie's waltzing fingers broke over the keys with a final flourish and quaver. "What! Do you sing, Mrs. Carruthers? How delightful."

"Yes, but only sacred music," answered Meg, gravely; and the clear brown light came into her eyes. "Of late years I have cared for little else."

The Vicar's wife looked up with an approving smile.


"I think we all enjoy sacred music better than anything," said Mary, looking very much like her husband as she spoke. Meg's stoop and eye-glasses were forgotten now: a thrill of suppressed excitement passed through the circle as the grand deep voice filled the little room. Belle put down her work, and her eyes filled with tears, and even Robert looked moved and surprised. The Vicar coming in, took his place at his wife's side noiselessly; only Rotha sat and worked on, seemingly unimpressed.

"Do not leave off; pray—pray give us something more," cried Nettie, delighted.

Meg received their praises as simply as they were given. She sang everything they asked her without stint or limitation. When Garton became urgent with her to repeat a favourite passage, she complied with perfect good-humour and precision. There was quite a circle round the piano presently: even Belle joined it. The Vicar drummed with his fingers delightedly as he listened; now and then he left off to watch Rotha sitting so patiently aloof.

The chiming of the church clock interrupted them all.

"It is very late. I must go now," said Rotha, as she came up again to the little work-table. "I wish I could have finished the braiding for you."



Mrs. Ord." Mary thanked her rather formally. "Good-night," continued Rotha, quite ignoring the eulogism passed on the beauty of her work. Then the Vicar rose and held out his hand.

"Good-night, Miss Maturin. To-morrow I shall do myself the honour of calling at Bryn; that is, if you are not otherwise engaged."

Rotha gave him one of her queer, wistful looks, and then something seemed to rise up and choke her, and she turned away.

"Shall you be at home?" he continued, watching her keenly.

"I shall always be at home to my clergyman, I hope," was the low-toned answer. Perhaps it came to our Vicar in the light of a reproach, for he drew back instantly.

Rotha included all her other adieux in one grave, comprehensive bow, and only Garton followed his brother's example and shook hands. She hardly spoke at all till she wished Nettie good-bye, and then there was no resentment in her smile and shake of the hand.

"It has been a horrid evening, I am afraid," said Nettie, with a dismal shrug of her shoulders.

"No, you must not say that. You meant it kindly, I am sure. But it was very unfortunate. You must never ask me again with them—never!" cried the girl, with a sudden pang in

her voice, that struck Nettie. "I don't think they wish it. It is very strange, but no one seems to care to know me." They were standing outside the door in the moonlight when Rotha said this. The sadness of the words sobered Nettie instantly.

"Yes, indeed, Miss Maturin, they do. I care to know you, and Aunt Eliza too; every one will when they have once broken the ice. In a small place like this there are always difficulties. People get into cliques and sets, and no one knows at first who belongs to which. It is so confusing."

"I fancy Meg and I will make our own clique," answered Rotha, smiling very sadly.

"Oh! that's stuff and nonsense," returned Nettie, with a droll little laugh. "Why there's Mrs. Blake dying to get you into her set, and that's the tip-top of Kirkby society—*la crème de la crème*, you know, only it's rather heavy. I like my set the best. You should come to one of my 'teakettle gossips,' as I call them when I have the pick of my twenty-three friends. I don't think you would go away with such a grave face as you have to-night."

"Oh, Miss Underwood! I did my best; I did, indeed," began Rotha, pleading. "But I was so taken by surprise, and——"

"Oh, you mean about them!" returned Nettie, nodding in the direction of the drawing-

room window. "Yes, yes, I understand. Of course they were very stiff and disagreeable—Mr. Robert, especially. But you take my advice," she continued, linking her arm good-humouredly in Rotha's, as they walked down the little foot-path together. "Just let him have his ill-humour out. He's prejudiced—that's what he is. He can't bear to see any one enjoying the goods that he thinks ought to belong to himself. Bless you, I know all about it! And so he's gone and put everything in a wrong light, and made them all stiff and uncomfortable together. Of course they wont thaw all at once. It's very unfortunate, as you say," continued Nettie, with breathless candour; "all the more that I have put my foot into it. But if there's one thing I hate it is meanness; and it is dreadfully mean."

"Miss Nettie, I am waiting to say good-night," said a voice behind them, and there was the Vicar striding down the path.

Rotha released herself from Nettie's arm in some confusion. Had he heard—was it possible that he could have heard the last speech? Nettie was wondering the same as she put out a pettish hand to him.

"What, are you going already? It is impossible to be in two places at once. You might have waited till I came back," and Nettie's voice was full of outraged dignity.

"I left a message with your Aunt," he replied,




coolly. "Mary and Belle are upstairs still. I am hurrying home to write an important letter. Miss Maturin, you are in need of an escort; we are going the same way. I will walk with you to your door."

"No, indeed, Mr. Ord," returned Rôtha, hastily. "I have Mrs. Carruthers with me." But the Vicar was determined. Nettie bade them good-bye with some confusion and then pouted, because the Vicar only lifted his hat to her as he went out. As she stood leaning against the little gate, and watched the three long shadows in the moonlight, she thought of Rotha's sad words—"It is very strange, but no one cares to know me." Perhaps Mr. Ord had repented of his coldness by this time, and had taken this opportunity of making friends. He often had odd ways of doing things, Nettie thought. But for once Nettie Underwood's surmises were wrong; for all the way the Vicar only spoke to Mrs. Carruthers about church music; and when they parted at the door, Rotha had not once opened her lips, except to say good-night.

"Are you very tired, dearest?" asked Mrs. Carruthers, as she lingered unusually on the threshold of Rotha's room, when they had retired for the night.

"No," said Rotha, very quietly, as she gave her cheek passively to her friend. "I am so



glad that you have had such a pleasant evening, and that they admired your singing so much, Meg." And then she closed the door, still smiling, and Mrs. Carruthers went away.

The smile was still on her face when she reached the dressing-table. But stretching out her hand to the glass for some purpose or other, she suddenly saw with surprise that she was quite white to her lips, and tried to sit down before the gathering faintness should overpower her. "I am glad she is gone. I am glad she did not see me like this," she said, feebly, as she struggled with the languor that oppressed her. "I suppose the strain was too great, or I made myself out braver than I was."

Braver than she was? Ah, One alone knew where the frail, girlish heart found all its strength and power of patience! Long after the Vicarage people were asleep, and Meg was calling on Jack's name in her dreams, Rotha was praying her nightly prayer over and over again with streaming eyes, "Lead me in a plain path, O God, because of my enemies!"

## CHAPTER XIV.

## THE VICAR GOES TO BRYN.

"Upon her face there was the tint of grief,  
 The settled shadow of an inward strife,  
 And an unquiet drooping of the eye,  
 As if its lid were charged with unshed tears."

BYRON.

*Duke.* "What's her history?"

*Viola.* A blank, my lord."

SHAKESPEARE.

THE Vicar was in no very enviable frame of mind the following afternoon as he went up the sandy road towards Bryn. It was bad enough to be inwardly conscious of failure, and to know that his practice had not exactly tallied with his precepts. But that he should have been taught this lesson by a chit like Nettie was humiliating, to say the least of it. On his return home the previous evening he had said very little to his wife about Miss Maturin, but had expressed himself as being very wrathful with Nettie.

"I hope you will be very severe with her, Austin," Mary had remarked. "I consider that she has put an affront upon us all, and especially on Robert."

"I am beginning to doubt my ability to fight

all Robert's battles," returned the Vicar, with a sigh. "But you need not be afraid of my leniency with Nettie; if I do rebuke her, it will be in no very measured terms, I assure you. But I hardly know whether it will not be wiser to leave her alone altogether."

"I think she ought to be lectured for her meddling," Mary had answered, and then the subject had dropped. After that she had tried to say a word or two that might induce Austin to speak of their next-door neighbour, but her hints were disregarded; the Vicar could not be persuaded to open his lips on the events of the evening.

As he crossed the bridge and rang at the bell he had not yet made up his mind what plan he should pursue during the coming interview; on the whole he thought it would be better to let circumstances guide him. If Mrs. Carruthers were there, he thought he would confine himself to mere commonplaces, and watch Miss Maturin closely as he talked. But if she were alone, well! he hardly knew what he should do—he almost thought perfect frankness would be the best. He little thought that Miss Maturin had taken the matter into her own hands, that she had elected to be alone, and had sent Mrs. Carruthers into Blackscar on some pretext, that she might be free from all interruption.

The Vicar had wondered in which room he

would be received. He rather thought there would be some little state in the mode of his reception. But here he was wrong. The drawing-room door indeed stood open; he could see the marble pillars, and the black-and-gold Chinese cabinet, and the long slants of sunlight through the French windows, as he passed, but he was not invited to enter. The rosy-cheeked maid-servant ushered him instead into a sunny little room which he remembered to have been his aunt's breakfast-parlour, where Miss Maturin was alone.

She laid aside her work to receive him, but took it up again immediately. Some women feel less nervous when they have their needle in their hands. Rotha Maturin was one of these: she must always be turning those restless fingers of hers to account. As the Vicar sat down he could not fail to note the pleasantness of the surroundings, the little refined womanly touches which make a room so characteristic of its owner: the freshly filled flower vases, the few well-chosen books, the basket heaped up with useful work, a half-finished illumination beautifully designed; outside, the lilies, and the lawn with its beds of creamy tea-roses and geraniums; a pair of doves cooed from some hidden recess, and a small black kitten was chasing the fantail pigeons.

"You see I have kept my promise," said the Vicar, turning to Rotha with a scrutinizing smile. As he spoke he noticed the smoothness of her



hair, and the swift movements of her thin white hands; there was a womanly propriety about her whole person that pleased him better than mere beauty, her very gravity seemed fitting to him.

"I have expected you for a long time," she replied; "perhaps it was my ignorance, but I thought a clergyman always visited all the members of his congregation." She spoke quite simply and without any intention of reproach, but the Vicar looked slightly perturbed.

"It is rather difficult in these free churches for a clergyman to know all his parishioners," he returned, hesitatingly. "I have given offence more than once from this cause. One lady left my church because I had never been near her. I found out afterwards that she had been a constant attendant for more than six months. These mistakes will occur, but I am only mentioning this casually. Of course I have been aware for some time that you are a member of my congregation."

"Yes, Mr. Ord, and I have fully understood why you have deviated from your ordinary rule with regard to me."

"Indeed, Miss Maturin."

"Of course I felt how difficult it must be for you to come here."

"Do you mean on my aunt's account?" And the Vicar looked at her very keenly as he asked

this question. But Rotha raised her eyes to his without flinching.

"No, Mr. Ord; I do not mean that. I do not think that you would shrink from coming to Bryn from a sense of painful associations. Men are braver than women in these things. I think, nay I am sure, that you have avoided it from a far different reason."

She was coming to the point now; how pale she was, and her voice was beginning to tremble; but in his heart the Vicar thought she had the better courage of the two. He hardly knew what to make of such valour.

"Of course I knew why you have refrained from coming to see me," she continued, and her voice was very sad. Then the Vicar drew his chair a little closer.

"Miss Maturin, do you mind speaking out a little more plainly?" he said. "We are trenching on a painful subject, I can see. Half measures are always unsatisfactory. Would it not be better that there should be full confidence between us?"

"I think it would, Mr. Ord."

"Well, do you mind telling me in plain words why you think I have refrained from coming to Bryn?"

Then for a moment a feeling very like shame dyed her face with crimson. There was something very painful in her blush, and he could not fail to see it. For a moment it undid the favourable

impression that her manner and words had hitherto made on him, and perhaps the consciousness that it would do so, drove the hateful colour still more hotly to her face.

"I mean, of course, if you do not mind," he said, rather more coldly."

"Oh, Mr. Ord, how can I help minding? But still, I will tell you if you wish it. Of course it is on your brother's account that you have hitherto avoided me."

"On my brother's? Do you mean on Robert's account?"

"Yes, undoubtedly."

Then it was the Vicar's turn to hesitate.

"Well, Mr. Ord?" there was a touch of sharpness in her tone elicited by pain.

"You are right, of course," he replied in a very low voice. "But still I am far from acknowledging that I have done my duty. I ought to have come and told you the truth if needs be."

"When I first saw you I made up my mind that you would certainly do so."

"Yes, and my delay has done you harm; I can see that plainly."

"Oh, as to that, of course I am the talk of the village. How can people help suspecting things when they see even their pastor holds aloof? When you failed to come I knew then what hard things he had been saying about me, and how



you had all judged and condemned me in your hearts. Is it not so?" she continued, looking at him full as keenly as he had at her.

"No, Miss Maturin; you are wrong there."

"Wrong in thinking that you have condemned me?"

"Yes; whatever the others may have done, I have refused entire credence to my brother's words till I could come and judge for myself."

"That was kind of you, Mr. Ord, and I thank you for it most heartily. I did not like to think that a clergyman could be so unjust."

"You must remember that appearances are sadly against you," he replied, a little piqued by this implied rebuke on his brother. "It is very difficult to say all that one feels to a stranger, but you must pardon me if I add that my brother is a man of strong discernment."

"And of strong prejudices too," she returned, with a faint smile. "I cannot fancy him soon parting with an idea that he has once formed. If I were not afraid of troubling you, Mr. Ord, I would ask you to listen to my defence. It would be such a relief if I might go over it once again."

"Do so, by all means," was the reply. And as the Vicar composed himself to listen, the wonderful softness of her voice and bearing, filled him again with a feeling akin to admiration. If she should indeed be innocent of this grievous sin of

covetousness, how nobly and well would she have borne herself under the bitterness of their accusation. He thought then that she would be a woman of no common stamp, of whom any one might be proud—worthy to bear comparison with Belle or even his own Mary; but all the same, he felt as though he could not hold her guiltless.

So Rotha Maturin told the story of her life, and she told it well. She used few words, she made no attempt to work upon his feelings—a simple statement of facts, ungarnished, almost bare, was all she offered. When she had finished, she sat with her hands folded and her head just a little drooping, waiting for his reply. The quietness of her manner might have been taken for indifference, but the Vicar did not misunderstand it.

“Well, Mr. Ord?” she said at last, as he still sat silent, revolving her last words. Then he got up and walked about the room with his face still turned from her.

He almost wished now that she had not told him her story: it made him so full of pity for her; when he turned his face from her, it was because his eyes were filled with tears. What a unloved, hard-working youth! Was it any wonder that amid such temptations, the longing for what was not hers should cleave to her? Would Robert’s or his hands have been cleaner if they

had been placed in the same circumstances? Good man as he was, he almost shrank from asking himself the question.

"Neither do I condemn thee." The words came to him again and again as he paced the room. Should the servant be less merciful than the Master? Was it for him to cast the first stone at this erring child because he and his were so sorely injured? The hardness of his prejudice was dying out as far as he was concerned; he could tell himself with a clear conscience that he had forgiven her. But would he be fulfilling his duty? Ought he not to refrain from his pity until she had been led to acknowledge her fault? The world might gloss it over and exonerate it, but until she had owned that she had "coveted and desired other men's goods," he ought not to throw open his hearth and home to her; until she had confessed her sin, the forgiveness must be qualified.

Poor Rotha! She did not need any words to tell her of her condemnation. She sat watching the Vicar with dry, hot eyes, as he walked heavily to and fro. Her little story had failed then? Why was her word to be always doubted? For a moment as she sat apart, she thought she would fling all her hated possessions away, and go out of Bryn empty-handed, and with head erect; they must believe her then, she thought. But a few minutes' reflection showed her the folly of this

impulse. Where was her endurance? would it not be cowardly to fly from her troubles? Was she sure that such a reckless step would clear her in their eyes? Would it not be nobler to live it down? Ay, and she would do it too. "God defends the innocent," she said, with an inward sob, and then the Vicar came to her side and took her hand.

"My child," he said, in a low, tender voice, "you do not know how earnestly I desire to be your friend." And as she lifted up her sad eyes to him in some surprise, "Yes, indeed; and no less your friend, because I cannot hold you perfectly guiltless in this thing."

She tried to answer him, but she could not; her head dropped lower and lower. "Oh, my God! do not try me above what I am able to bear," came from her inmost heart, but her lips were firmly closed.

"Do not mistake us," he continued, still more earnestly, "we shall not be hard on you. My brother is prejudiced, but even he spoke most feelingly of your youth and temptation. You are not the first who has been gravely tried and has fallen."

The drooping head was raised a little.

"The shock of our disappointment is broken now," he went on. "You need not fear that we shall grudge you your possessions. All we ask you is to acknowledge that you have wronged

us, by word if not by deed, and to show some sorrow for the wrong."

The head was raised higher—higher; the firm lips unclosed.

"Mr. Ord! Would you have me perjure myself?"

"My poor child! Why ask me such a question?"

"Would it not be perjuring myself if I took a lie on my lips? How can I tell you I have done this thing when I am innocent? Why will you all persist in believing what is false?"

"My dear Miss Maturin!"

"Mr. Ord," she said, passionately, "we are both traversing a circle, but we shall never meet, for you are on one side and I another. Can I make you see with my eyes, when my very whiteness is blackness to you? Why do you ask me to defend myself, when you know, you know you will not believe my word?"

"I would believe you if you would only be candid with me in this matter."

Then she rose, drawing up her slender figure to its full height, so that he was obliged to rise also.

"Do you wish to dismiss me, Miss Maturin?"

"No, Mr. Ord; I am not quite so ungracious as that. But I owe it to my own dignity not to talk any longer on this matter."

"Do you know you are grieving me terribly?" he went on.

"I am sorry for that, Mr. Ord."

"I did so desire to be your friend, but now you are setting yourself so deliberately apart from us; how can I help you if you will not be persuaded in this thing?"

"You cannot help me," she returned, hurriedly. "No one can help me who does not believe my word. Don't look so sad, Mr. Ord. I can feel how kind and good you are, in spite of all this miserable misunderstanding. It will not be your doing, if I am talked about and slandered by the whole village."

"I hope nothing of that kind will happen," he returned; and then Rotha briefly told him the remarks she had overheard.

"That will never do," he exclaimed, much concerned; "Mary must call on you at once. I think it would not be desirable under the circumstances for you to come to the Vicarage—at least, for the present; but no time must be lost in letting people know that Mrs. Ord has called."

Rotha hesitated for a moment, and then a great yearning for kindness and sympathy seized her.

"Yes, yes, you may send her. Do not leave me all alone in my misery," she pleaded; and now her eyes brimmed over with tears. "You and Mrs. Ord shall say what you like to me, and I will try and bear it, if you will only let me hear sometimes a

kind voice from the outer world. Meg is always so sad, and it is so dreary here."

The pathetic voice, the childishness of the appeal, which came nevertheless from a woman's wrung heart, were too much for our Vicar, and he stretched out his kind hand to her.

"I will come, my child—I will come, and Mary too, never fear, and perhaps in a little while you will not be afraid to confide in us. Have you anything else to say?" he continued, for she seemed as though she were about to speak.

"Yes; I was going to ask you if you would find me some work. You don't know what it is for two women to sit here all alone and eat their hearts out. Give me something to do for those who are more wretched than I—any work—I would not refuse the meanest office—indeed I would not, Mr. Ord."

As she raised her face, flushed with its earnestness, he thought what a good face it was, and for an instant the doubt crossed him, had he—had they all been mistaken?

"You will not refuse me because of my unworthiness?" she continued, misinterpreting his silence.

"Refuse you, poor child! Who am I, after all, that I should judge of your worthiness or unworthiness? I was only considering the difficulties attendant on your proposition. Perhaps,

for the present, I will not put you on our regular staff of workers : but there is an old blind woman who would be most thankful if any one would read her a chapter daily ; and there is a poor girl dying of consumption, who has a drunken mother—it is a very sad case indeed. I do not know whether you would care to undertake such a painful duty ?”

“Try me,” was Rotha’s answer. And then, with sweet humility, “If there be any work that Mrs. Ord or you wish done, and that you think the other ladies will not like, I hope you will reserve it for me.”

“Very well—then that is a bargain,” he replied, cheerfully, not caring to show how much he was touched. “I shall come up and see you again about these cases, and perhaps I had better take you to poor Annie myself ; one can never tell what sort of reception a lady is likely to meet with from that wretched woman. I have taken you at your word, Miss Maturin ; the task is no easy one, I assure you.”

“I am not afraid,” returned Rotha, simply.

“Perhaps Mrs. Carruthers might be induced to help us with our school and clothing-club ? I am afraid I am very covetous, but I must turn that magnificent voice of hers to account. I wish it were possible to make her choir-master.”

“That reminds me that I have another favour to ask, Mr. Ord. You see,” with a faint smile,



"your kindness is making me bold. Don't, don't, please, be angry with Miss Underwood ; I am sure she meant it kindly last night."

The Vicar's face grew dark. "It was very impertinent kindness then, Miss Maturin. I am greatly disposed to be very severe on the subject with Miss Nettie."

"Yes, but you will not?" she pleaded, earnestly. "I know how wrong it was to you all—how very, very wrong, but I am sure she meant good to us all ; miserable as I was, I could not help feeling that, and I did so hope you would forgive her."

"Well, well, we shall see about it," returned the Vicar, but his smile was a little forced, and then he bade her good-bye. It might have been the force of old habit, but he went through the glass door out on the lawn, and so to the green door in the wall. As he let himself out he glanced back, and saw Rotha standing among the lilies and watching him.

It was noticed by every one at the Vicarage that the Vicar was not himself that day : he was grave and preoccupied, and scarcely spoke to Robert when he came in to spend the evening. When the boys had gone to bed, and he and Mary were alone, he briefly related his interview with Miss Maturin, and begged her to lose no time in calling at Bryn.

"I don't think we are justified in letting a young girl be the talk of the place," he continued.

“Graves will be getting hold of it, and we don’t want to be slashed by his virulent tongue. I know he would do anything to spite me and Robert.” Now Graves was the editor of the *Blackscar and Kirkby Herald*, a shoemaker by trade, and a Radical and Dissenter, and was much given to snarl at the heels of the so-called High Church party.

Austin’s innovations, few and simple as they were, had given great offence to the Rector of Blackscar, a worthy gentleman of the old school, who clung to the black gown and the “high pulpit” as though they were the symbols of his party. A surpliced choir had recently been started at Blackscar, much to the tribulation of the elder members of his congregation, and it was a fine thing to see the Rector gallantly bringing up the procession on a choir festival in his short, well-worn, corded silk gown. The Rector had been rather averse to the surplices for some time, and had united his groans with the elder members, who thought fustian jackets and clean collars would have been more in accordance with the views of St. Paul; but the groans had been over-borne by the younger portion of the congregation. A “bee” was organized by some enterprising young ladies; the surplices were duly sewn and stitched, and a large parcel deposited at the Rectory on the Saturday night. Next morning the rosy-faced country lads walked

sheepishly to their places, the beheld of all beholders, looking for all the world like a flock of white geese, as one irascible old lady in the greengrocery trade suggested. "Or like the cherubim and seraphim, continually," as was remarked by one mother, whose red-headed lad was the black sheep of the whole choir from his habit of eating sour apples during the sermon.

The surplices had carried the day, but the Rector's soul was sad within him. He had always been a little high with the neighbouring clergy, especially with the Rev. Austin Ord, whose daily services had been a great offence in his eyes, but he had now become almost tyrannical; latterly he had taken up Ebenezer Graves, the editor of the *Blackscar Herald*. Ebenezer made shoes for his Reverence, and for Mrs. Price and the young ladies, and the Rector often came to his shop, ostensibly for boots, but in reality for a gossip. Mrs. Graves, who managed her husband's business, a thin, bilious-looking woman with a nasal drawl, was also in high favour at the Rectory.

"A very worthy man: very worthy people, my dear," the Rector would say. "Pity, they are Dissenters. Writes very good articles does Ebenezer, quite native talent. I think Blackscar ought to be proud of him: it is no use Ord snubbing him and putting him down on every occasion; the man can't help having a fluent pen, I suppose."

"Ebenezer hates Mr. Ord," put in one of the younger daughters. "I believe it is because he told him that he ought to look after his business better and make his own shoes. Fancy the author of the 'Bullfinch's Elegy' and 'The Lamb's Complaint' making shoes!"

"Yes, and he said 'The Lamb's Complaint' ought to be that he was generally too much done," put in another daughter.

"And he declared the 'Bullfinch's Elegy' reminded him of treacle and brown sugar," whereby it might be seen that Austin was apt to be a little funny at the expense of the poet shoemaker. At home he was rather more plain-spoken; he called Ebenezer Graves a canting rascal, and was very indignant when Mary wanted to buy Laurie some boots there, pleading that they were cheaper than at any other shop in Blackscar. Therefore the Vicar's fear with regard to themselves and Miss Maturin was not without foundation. Letters had often appeared in the *Blackscar Herald* containing mysterious hints and surmises by an unknown correspondent very damaging to some inhabitant of Blackscar; little private family matters had even been divulged in this manner. Once or twice an injured person had been inclined to sue Ebenezer for libel, but the hints had been so obscure, and the whole couched in such mysterious language that there was nothing of which one could take

hold. "They should try a good horsewhipping," Garton had said once. "What is the use if they cannot prove the article is his?" returned the Vicar, "he would only have you up for assault and battery. There's no getting at the rascal. I remonstrated with him once in very strong language about one of my parishioners being annoyed by just such a letter. 'Why do you allow such a libellous thing to be printed in your paper?' I said to him when he had denied all knowledge of the writer. 'Why not?' was his only answer, 'it is a very good letter. People think the Correspondence Corner the most amusing in the whole paper. The man who wrote that article knew what he was about. I don't see a thing's libellous because the cap happens to fit one of your congregation. Bless you! some of these things are just make-ups, and mean nothing at all.' 'I am positive that there is meaning in this,' I replied. 'My friend feels himself much injured. You ought to induce your correspondent to retract the invidious paragraph, and write an apology.' 'I don't think he'll do that,' he said, quite coolly. I declare I came out of the place in a perfect rage."

Therefore when the Vicar mentioned Ebenezer's name on this occasion, Mary looked grave, and said at once that she would call. "I don't think you feel so badly about her now you have

been to Bryn," she said, arguing rather shrewdly from her woman's judgment.

"I don't know what to think about her, Mary," returned the Vicar, rather sadly. "I am only sure of one thing, that the whole affair is making me quite miserable. I cannot help thinking all day that we are letting ourselves be blinded by Robert's prejudice and mere circumstantial evidence. And yet, what can we do? Not Proven is not equivalent to Not Guilty. And I tell you what, Mary—faulty, or not faulty, covetous or not, she is the sweetest-spoken woman I have met for a long time."

"Oh, Austin!"

"Yes indeed, dear; and you must go and speak kindly to her; whatever Robert may choose to do, it is not for us to refuse the cold water of charity. Perhaps by patience and gentleness we may win her from her reserve."

"I don't think I shall sleep all night for thinking of what I am to say to her," said Mrs. Ord, ruefully.

"Come, Mary, that is not brave. Don't think about it at all, that is the best way." And with that homely counsel Mrs. Ord was fain to be content.

Procrastination was not one of Mrs. Ord's sins. She had decided to go on the morrow, and punctually at the appointed hour she set off to perform her difficult duty.

Miss Maturin had evidently expected her visit, for Mary found her alone as on the previous day.

"My husband has prepared you for my visit, I hope?" she said, when they had shaken hands and had sat down. But this time Miss Maturin had not taken up her work.

"Oh, yes; he told me to expect you. I think, under the circumstances, it was very good of him to send you."

"Oh, no! you must not say that."

"Oh, but it was! It was goodness itself. And it was kind of you too to come."

"Of course I should do as he wished." But Mary, when she had said this, felt as though her words had implied some reproach.

"But nevertheless it was very kind, Mrs. Ord. I don't know whether you will care to hear it from my lips, but I think I never knew any one so good as your husband."

"I was afraid you might think him hard."

"Hard? oh, no! Of course it hurt me to have him saying such things of me, and refusing to believe my words, but through it all, his gentleness touched me to the heart."

"Austin is always gentle," replied Mary, and her eyes looked very softly at Rotha. It was not in a wife's nature to hear such sweet praises of her husband unmoved.

"Yes; I saw that in his face; as far back as

that first evening when he put open the church-door for me, I longed for him to be my friend. Do you know, when he was pleading with me yesterday, I almost wished that I had done this thing, that I might confess it. I was so sure of his sympathy and forgiveness."

"Why did you not?" was on Mrs. Ord's lips, but she prudently refrained herself. She was very much startled then when Rotha answered her unspoken thought.

"You see, I could not say what was not true, Mrs. Ord."

"No, of course not," returned Mary, hastily; and then there was an awkward pause.

"I was so afraid that you might think us unnecessarily hard," she went on, anxious to sound this singular girl more deeply. "In your position I think I should be tempted to defend myself more boldly."

"If you were in my position," replied Rotha, gently, "you would know how hard it is for a lonely stranger to do otherwise than I have done. When the first shock of it all came upon me, I was at once paralysed; then I was for giving it all up and going away; but Meg proved to me that I was wrong."

"Do you mean Mrs. Carruthers?" asked Mary, much interested.

"Yes; she showed me how morbid and cowardly I was, and how God would take



account of my stewardship; and she told me that if I carried my cross well, it would in the end carry me; and it is none the less a cross because it is laid upon me by a fellow creature."

"Mrs. Carruthers must be a very good woman," returned Mary. She was inwardly wondering whether Meg believed in her friend's innocence.


"Yes, she is one of a thousand;" and then with a sudden impulse she told Mrs. Ord a little of Meg's strange history. Mary listened with unfeigned sympathy: it was a safe topic, and led their thoughts into a less painful channel; and the allotted half-hour had long ago passed before she had bethought herself of taking leave.

"Be sure you tell Mrs. Carruthers that I hope she will come to the school," she said, as she rose from her chair. "I shall be most thankful for her help."

"Not more thankful than Meg will be," returned Rotha. "She is so fond of children."

"And Austin will see you about those cases to-morrow. We are so glad to get any one who will read to poor Annie. He told me to say again that you were to send for him if you were in any special need."

"Thank you. He is very kind. Am I—am I to see you again, Mrs. Ord?" And she looked wistfully into Mary's pleasant face; there was something so lovable and trusting in it.



"I don't know ; I will ask Austin," stammered Mrs. Ord, much confused. The Vicar had said nothing as to a repetition of the visit.

"Never mind ; of course you must ask your husband. I shall quite understand if you do not come." And there was such sweetness and sadness in her tone, that Mrs. Ord's heart quite ached for her, and she bade her good-bye so kindly that the poor girl coloured with pleasure.

"Well, Mary ?" said the Vicar, as she came into the study and leant over him silently, "was the task a very difficult one ?"

"No, not very," returned Mary, absently, as her fingers strayed among the curls. "But, Austin, I do feel very unhappy."

"Unhappy, my darling !" And the Vicar put back his head that he might see her face. "Why, Polly, nothing has happened, surely ?"

"No, not happened ; but, Austin, I do feel as though we may be wrong about this. When I sat and talked to her I almost thought that Robert could not be right."

The Vicar drew a long breath.

"There was something so thoroughly true about her face, she does not look as though she knew how to deceive ; and it would be deceit if she kept telling us that she never wanted the money. Oh, Austin ! suppose we are wronging her all this while ?"

"I am afraid the same doubt has occurred to

me," he said, in a grave voice. "Once or twice yesterday I had some unpleasant twinges. It is certainly very dreadful to think that we may have been accusing an innocent girl wrongly, but appearances were so much against her; and then I never knew Robert to suspect a person unjustly before."

"It will be a comfort to think the blame will be his, and not ours," returned Mary.

"Why, that would be a poor comfort, Polly; and of which I should decline to avail myself. No, no, my dear! We must not shelter our mistakes under other people's. 'Every one for himself,' in a wider sense, 'and God for us all.' I don't know how it is, Mary, that you have infected me with your fears—I suppose by giving colour and expression to my own thoughts; but I feel as though this were a thing rather to pray over than talk about." And such an anxious line came across the Vicar's forehead that Mary stooped and kissed it away.

"Dear Austin! she was so full of your goodness to her."

"Was she, Mary?" Then, in a half-whisper full of feeling, "Dear Lord! Should I not be good to one of the stray lambs Thou carriest in Thy bosom?" Then, in his natural voice, "Look there, Mary," and he pointed to a little picture of the Good Shepherd that hung over his writing-table. "Look how that foolish lamb has got entangled in that thicket, and how sorely the

briars and thorns must be wounding him ; and now look how the Shepherd helps him. He has gone down upon his knees, and with his own hands is putting aside one cruel bramble after another, calling to him fondly all the time. One sees the foolish little face raised to bleat its answer. By-and-by he will carry it on his shoulders rejoicing. That is just how He deals with all his erring ones."

"Well?" whispered Mary—she was kneeling by him now.

"People think I am not bitter enough in my invectives against sin, because I am so ready to put aside the briars. But these men are more like hirclings. It has come into our hearts to distrust this poor child ; nay, more, to be angry with her. We accuse her of coveting our money and diverting it into a wrong channel—is it not so?"

"Yes, Austin."

"And we have been very bitter about it, and said all manner of harsh things, all the while knowing that we ought to be heaping coals of fire on her head. I am far from saying still that I hold her guiltless, but all the same, last night and to-day I have felt very sad."

"It is not our fault," whispered Mary.

"No, dear ; it has not been our fault in the first instance, but I ought to have gone to her before. People are beginning to say things to

her injury, and it may be very bad for her and for us too."

"But, Austin, what are we to do?"

"Well, Mary, we must wait and pray; that is all we can do for the present. I forgive her from my heart, but for Robert's sake I cannot have her at the Vicarage. Why, he and Belle would be up in arms! You can go and see her now and then, just to stop people's tongues; and be sure you let Mrs. Blake know you have been. They will get to understand in time that we have no wish to be intimate."

"And if she be not really what we think her?" asked Mary, returning to the principal subject of her thoughts.

"Well, God defends the innocent—we are too liable to forget that—and in His good time He will enable her to prove it to us. Any way, my course is clear. I must get an influence over her and induce her to repose confidence in me. I am putting her to a severe test now, by the work I have given her. The way in which she performs that will be a great argument in her favour. In old times, Mary, an accused person had to walk blindfold over nine ploughshares of burning iron."

"I think she walked over one last night," replied Mary, rather soberly. And then, as the Vicar looked meaningly at his watch, she gathered up her things and went away.









